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Under the Mistletoe
Sweet Sea Spirit
Christmas In Toyland
Gypsy Enchantment

REBECCA FLANDERS
EMILIE RICHARDS
JULIE KISTLER
LAURIE PAIGE

REBECCA FLANDERS

Rebecca Flanders is a native of Georgia who began her writing career at age nine. She completed her first novel by the time she was nineteen and sold her first book in 1979. She's the award-winning author of over 50 novels. Rebecca's hobbies are oil and water painting and both composing and listening to music.

EMILIE RICHARDS

Award-winning author Emilie Richards believes that opposites attract, and her marriage is vivid proof. "When we met," the author says, "the only thing my husband and I could agree on was that we were very much in love." Though her first book was written in snatches with an infant on her lap, she now writes full-time. She loves writing, and she's a sucker for happy endings.



JULIE KISTLER

Julie Kistler loves combining screwball comedy with fantasy elements to come up with her very own special mix of humor and romance. "Christmas in Toyland" was inspired by a lifetime of watching old movies, as well as those Christmas Eves wondering what Santa would leave under her tree. Julie now lives in Illinois with her tall, dark and handsome husband, and their cat, Thisbe.



LAURIE PAIGE

Laurie Paige is the author of over 35 novels. She reports romance is blooming in her part of northern California. With the birth of her second grandson, she finds herself madly in love with three wonderful males—"all hero material." So far, her husband hasn't complained about the other men in her life.

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From the desk of Candy Lee
Publisher

Dear Romance Reader,

The holidays are here at last! With so much to do—shopping for the perfect gifts, visiting with family and friends, and spreading holiday cheer—I'm looking forward to spending a little quiet time alone...with these four wonderfully romantic and heartwarming romances!

But don't think you've been left off my shopping list, because I have some fantastic news for you!

Starting with our very next issue, you'll be seeing some fun, exciting changes such as: a closer look at our authors, with more in-depth author features, the chance to win a free one-year subscription through a short-story contest, additional columns and more.

In addition, we're going to be adding a Letters to the Editor column, and we'd like to hear from you! So whatever is on your mind, please write us and let us know.

Please write: Attention: Candy Lee
 Harlequin World's Best Romances,
 Letters to the Editor
 P.O. Box 37256
 Boone, IA 50037-0256

I wish you a happy holiday season filled with lots of love and laughter!

Best wishes,

Candy Lee

P.S. Be sure to check out the special gift subscription offer in the back of the magazine!

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CANDY LEE
PUBLISHER

SHELLEY CINNAMON
ART DIRECTOR

JOHN KIT
CIRCULATION DIRECTOR

TRICIA LINDSAY
SUBSCRIPTION MANAGER

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REBECCA FLANDERS

Under the Mistletoe



Brett Underwood has it all—success, wealth, a sprawling L.A. pad, only no one to share it with. But like a true Christmas miracle, a long-lost letter from his childhood sweetheart, Dani Griffin, called him back East. Just in time, too. Because Dani was about to marry the wrong man....

The sound of the mail truck's horn interrupted Bret's fifth lap across the pool. By the time he pulled himself out of the water, the door chimes had already echoed once.

Bret opened the door. "Morning," he said, accepting the carrier's pen.

"Just sign right there by the X, if you will."

Bret glanced at the man. "You're new on this route, aren't you?"

"Just filling in during the holidays."

Bret grimaced. "Yeah, I guess it is that time again, isn't it? Seems to start earlier every year."

"Never too early for me," the mailman replied cheerfully, and handed him a package, plus several other envelopes. "Have a good day now."

Bret glanced through the mail, then he stopped. There was one blank envelope—no return address, no postmark, not even an address. "Hey!" he called, going back to the door. But the truck was gone.

He tore open the envelope and skipped down to the signature and his heartbeat actually jumped as he read "Dani."

But how...and why...?

He had to sit down to read this.

Dear Bret,

I'm never going to mail this, and no one but you would understand why I have to write it down. Tonight you're getting married...

Ten years ago, Bret Underwood had married Laura Wheeling. He had

thought that he loved her.

Ten years ago, Dani Griffin had sat down to write this letter because that was what they did when they had a secret too big to keep and too important to tell...they wrote it down. Once it was out of their systems, they tore the message up and the urge to tell was gone. Except Dani hadn't torn up this letter.

Tonight you're getting married, and I've tried to be happy for you, but I think you know I don't approve. What you don't know is why, and that's the secret. There's someone who loves you, Bret, more than Laura ever could. And that's why I can't tell you...because you love Laura, not her, and it might make a difference. I hope you understand why I had to keep this secret. But even if you don't, remember that I'll always be

Your best friend,
Dani

He read the letter again, slowly. Then he just sat at the table and gazed out the open French door that led to the pool.

"Dani," he murmured. "You always did know how to get a fellow's day off to a helluva start, didn't you?"

A wry smile touched his lips. If she had given him this letter ten years ago, it might have saved him a lot of pain...or it might not have made any difference.

There's someone who loves you, Bret....

Who could it possibly have been? His mind drifted back into the past, over the girls he had known...hometown girls, sophisticated college girls, voluptuous starlets... A wistful smile crossed his lips. Which one of them could have changed his life? And how could Dani have known?

Unless...it was Dani herself.

Not Dani. Even to consider the possibility made him feel conceited and foolish.

When they'd gone away to separate colleges, her twice-weekly letters were the only things that had kept his head on straight. When his marriage broke up, his long-distance phone bill averaged four hundred dollars a month. When he had gone home for his mother's funeral five years ago, he and Dani had sat up all night and talked, and he hadn't been ashamed to cry on her shoulder. He had never been as close to anyone in the world as he was to Dani Griffin.

The night before his wedding, she had kissed him. It was a congratulatory kiss, but for one fleeting, wildly promising moment, Bret could have sworn it hovered on the edge of something more.

She had known all along. But she'd never said a word.

Abruptly, he picked up the phone and started to dial her number. Then he hung up. Just what was he supposed to say to her? "Say, about this letter you wrote me ten years ago and never intended to mail..." And how had it gotten here, anyway? The smart thing to do would be to forget about it—just as Dani apparently had for ten years.

But he couldn't. All the way downtown, he kept wondering. Who was the

girl who had loved him? And what was he supposed to do about it now?

BY THE TIME he arrived at the fifth-floor offices of Underwood Security Agency, he thought he had figured out how the letter had gotten to him. It must be connected with the envelope from Webb and Webb, Attorneys at Law. Maybe Dani had intended to send him a letter via the lawyers and had mistakenly sent this one instead....

What he needed was to talk to Dani.

His hand was on the telephone but he stopped. Because he really didn't want to talk to Dani. He wanted to *see* her.

It was crazy. He didn't have time to go flying off to Indiana, especially not now.

There's someone who loves you, Bret....

But he hadn't had a vacation in eight years, and it wasn't just the letter. There was the property he was trying to sell. Hadn't he been telling himself for years that he should go and look at the place for himself? Now that he had decided to put it in the hands of a real-estate agent, why put it off?

His hand was still on the receiver when the interoffice line buzzed. "Beechwood Promotions wants to know if you can handle the security for Neon Ecstasy on the fifteenth," his secretary, Linda, said.

"Tell Beechwood we're booked," he said abruptly. "Confirm with Century. The guys can handle that. Tell Syms—Never mind, I'll tell him myself. And cancel all my appointments for the next couple of weeks."

The silence on the line was stunned. "Are you okay?"

"No." Bret picked up the white en-

velope and smiled. "I'm not okay. I need a vacation."

*

"AND THAT'S THE LEGEND of the Christmas cactus," Dani said as she picked up the withered potted plant. "Every year, it blooms to remind us of what we're celebrating."

Four rows of third-graders regarded the plant she held in her hand.

"All year long, it hibernates, and then at Christmastime, it suddenly comes to life again. That's the miracle."

Dani set the plant on her desk. Bret had sent it to her five Christmases ago, and every year since, she had brought it out on December 1 and enthralled her class with the suspense of waiting for it to bloom. And every year, by the time the children left for the Christmas holidays, it had been covered with snowy white blossoms. It was one of the best parts of the season.

The bell rang, signaling a mad scramble for books and belongings. "All right," Dani called out. "Remember, tomorrow starts the auditions for the school play, and start thinking about what you want to make for your parents for Christmas. Don't leave before you copy your homework off the blackboard!"

In three minutes flat, the room was clear.

She had just begun to erase the blackboard when a voice came from behind her.

"If I'd had a teacher who looked as good as you do, I might never have gotten out of third grade."

Dani turned. She dropped the eraser.

He stood leaning by the door frame,

sandy hair tousled, broad shoulders, slim hips, perfect tan...

"Bret!" she cried, and flung herself at him.

They hugged each other, then she broke away, striking out at him playfully. "Bret, you snake, sneaking up on me like that!" She stood back. "When did you get in? What are you doing here?"

He looked at her, and he couldn't seem to stop grinning. How was it that she never changed?

Her brown hair was wound into a flat braid and tied with a perky yellow bow at the back. There was that same spattering of freckles across her nose and her face was glowing with color as it always did when she was happy.

"What are you doing here?" she asked. "Is something wrong?"

The letter lay like a guilty stain in his shirt pocket. She *would* think he was crazy if he told her he had driven eight hundred miles because of a letter she'd forgotten writing and had never meant him to read. Besides, that wasn't entirely why he had come.

"What?" he retorted. "A guy can't come home for the holidays without getting the third degree?"

Her face lit up again. "Are you really going to stay?"

"For a while, at least. I've got some business to take care of, and I don't know—"

"That's great! I can't believe it, Christmas together just like old times!" As she spoke, she had wound her arm through his and was leading him toward the door. "Mom is going to have a fit, she'll be so excited—"

"Whoa, hold on!" He stopped her, laughing. "Come up for air, will you?"

"Can't help it, I'm too excited." She

tugged on his arm. "This is perfect. You can wash up and change, and we'll get downtown in time to help string the lights. And tonight is the first bonfire down at the lake—"

Laughing, Bret scooped up Dani's coat and draped it over her shoulders as they walked outside.

DANI'S PARENTS still lived in the century-old farmhouse where she had grown up. They had never worked the land on any large scale and the property was now reduced to twelve acres. Dani's home was a converted barn at the end of the long driveway that led to the main farmhouse.

Dani pulled Bret up the three steps and across the wide porch at a semirun, calling, "Mom, company!" before she even got the door open.

The house smelled of something sweet and spicy baking in the kitchen.

"Bret Underwood, as I live and breathe!"

Anne Griffin stood at the threshold that led to the kitchen, and Bret went toward her with his arms open. "Miss Annie," he said. "It's good to see you!"

She held his shoulders and looked at him, beaming. "Well, I couldn't be more surprised if the archangel Gabriel just walked into my front room!" Then she touched his cheek, looking worried. "Are you growing a beard? You haven't joined some cult, have you?"

Dani's eyes twinkled, and Bret replied soberly, "No, ma'am. I've been driving all night."

"You know better than that! Pull over every two hours, that's what your daddy always said. Now, you just give me a minute to get your room in order—"

"No, wait, I planned on staying at a motel—"

"Don't talk nonsense. I'll just put fresh sheets on the bed. Dani, check that pie in the oven for me, will you?"

Bret watched Anne disappear up the stairs, shaking his head helplessly.

Bret got a glass from a cabinet and poured himself some milk, just as he had done when he was twelve. Then he helped himself to the contents of the cookie jar. "This place never changes," he said.

"Sure it does," Dani sat down at the breakfast table. "We've got cable now."

"So," she demanded. "What's going on?"

"I've decided to put the old place on the market. Thought I'd come down and look it over, see what needs to be done, that sort of thing."

Dani waved a dismissive hand. "You've been talking about that for years. You're never going to do it."

"Oh, yes, I am. I'm paying taxes on it. The rent I get barely pays the upkeep. So I listed it last week."

She lifted an eyebrow. "Well, good luck finding a buyer. Nobody around here has that kind of money."

"Actually, I listed it with an LA broker. He thinks he might be able to stir up some corporate interest."

Dani stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"You know, shopping malls, office complexes."

She gave a little bark of laughter.

"What, you don't think I can do it?"

"Yeah, right, the minute you strike oil on the south forty." She smiled at him.

"Dani," her mother called down the stairs. "I forgot to tell you—Todd called. He has to work late and can't

take you to the bonfire tonight. He wants you to call him back."

"Todd?" Bret frowned. "Who's he?"

Dani said, "I told you about Todd. He's the new editorial manager at the newspaper."

"I don't think so. I would've remembered somebody named *Todd*."

"I did, too. You just never listen."

"So, what's the deal?" His voice was too mild. "How'd you meet this dude? Are you sleeping with him?"

"I never sleep with anybody who lives within a twenty-mile radius of this town, you know that," she replied airily, but her cheeks were getting hotter.

"You are!" he declared. "You're hot and heavy with a guy named Todd! So," he went on, "are you going to tell me about him?"

Dani hesitated. As much as she had wanted to talk to Bret about this only a few moments ago, she really did not want to talk about Todd now.

"Later. Right now, you'd better get moving—we've got Christmas lights to string!"

"Have mercy, girl, I've been driving sixteen hours straight. What I need is a shower and a long nap."

"What you need," she corrected, "is to get in the spirit. Only twenty-four days left till Christmas."

"Ah, Dani, don't start with me. You know I hate all that holiday stuff."

She stared at him. "You do not! You love it."

"I hate it," he insisted.

"You love it. Now come on, we're going to miss all the fun."

Bret tried to remember a time when he had ever considered standing atop a cherry picker in the icy wind and stringing Christmas lights from lampposts

fun, but he couldn't. The single consolation was that, no matter how cold it was and no matter how tired he was, he was spending the afternoon with Dani. He was glad he had come home.

CLAYVILLE, INDIANA, was one of those postcard-perfect towns that dotted the Midwest.

When the first of December rolled around, every able-bodied man and woman with an hour to spare donated that time to dragging out the boxes of town Christmas decorations, uncoiling wires and rolls of garland, hanging lights and draping greenery across the streets.

Bret was greeted as though he had only been away on a short vacation.

"Some welcome-home party!" Bret called down to Dani, who was sorting evergreen boughs and wreaths.

She grinned up at him.

But when twilight came and the switch was turned on to a clamor of applause, even Bret had to admit it was all kind of pretty...in a small-town way.

The annual bonfire was the first official event of the Christmas season.

"Boy, does this bring back memories," Bret murmured as he got out of the car.

"Dani! Hi!" Mary Witt waved to her, a parka-clad two-year-old in tow as she made her way toward them. "Is that—Good heavens, it can't be! Bret Underwood?"

Soon other people spotted Bret. Those who hadn't yet done so welcomed him home and barraged him with questions, someone thrust a cup of hot chocolate into his hand, and someone else insisted he taste her mincemeat pie and tell her if it wasn't just like the recipe his own

mother had made famous countywide. Dani sneaked away to help Mary carry her two casseroles to the food pavilion.

Mary said, "So where's Todd tonight?"

Dani felt a small prickle of guilt that she had forgotten to return his call. "Working late. You know how it is."

"Does he know about, umm, Bret?"

"Bret just got in this afternoon. I haven't had a chance to introduce them."

"Now *that* should be interesting," Mary said.

Dani couldn't ignore that. "What do you mean?"

"Come on, Dani, you and Bret have been an item as long as I can remember. What's Todd going to think when he finds out the competition is in town?"

"Mary Witt, for heaven's sake!" Dani set the casseroles on the table. "Bret's always been like a brother to me."

"If you say so," Mary replied innocently, but her eyes were twinkling. "Still, I think Bret's even better-looking now than he was in high school, don't you? If Todd's got any sense, he's going to be jealous."

When Dani thought about the grand passion she had nursed for him that last summer, it was with the embarrassment of a newly formed adult for the childish things of the past. Bret was her lifelong friend and closer than a brother, but he had his life and she had hers. Yet even though she fought it, this was no girlish crush. This was love, quiet and genuine and desperately real. But he was in love with another woman.

Dani never told him, and at the end of the summer, he married someone else and broke Dani's heart.

Her mother called to her, and the real

world burst the bubble of memories. For the next hour and a half, as she dished out food and drink, Dani only glimpsed Bret through the crowd.

The traditional climax of the evening was the tossing of the final logs on the fire, and when everyone agreed that the blaze was roaring as brightly as it could possibly get, they would all gather round to sing Christmas carols. That was, for Dani, one of the most moving moments of the entire season, and this year, it would be doubly so because Bret was here.

She went in search of him while the men were heaving the last of the logs on the fire and found him talking to Lenore Skinner who, with her husband, George, and son, Jimmy, had tenanted Bret's farm for the past four years.

"Of course, we're not going to terminate the lease," Bret was saying, "and you'll have plenty of notice. But people will be coming out to look at the place from time to time, and I thought you should know my plans."

Lenore Skinner smiled weakly. She was a thin, work-worn woman in a shabby cotton coat. "You really should talk to my husband about this, Mr. Underwood. He couldn't come tonight. I think he's coming down with a bug."

"Maybe I could drive out in a couple of days. But meanwhile, I don't want you to worry. You've been fine tenants, and I'll do everything possible to make the transition easy for you."

Lenore shook her head, no longer smiling. "It doesn't matter, Mr. Underwood." Her voice sounded weary. "I don't reckon we'd be staying on long after the first of the year, anyhow."

She walked away, and Bret looked after her, puzzled. Dani came up to him. "They've been having a hard time," she

said. "George Skinner knows only farming, and that land has never been good for much more than weeds. He's tried to hold down other jobs, but the plant over in Centerville started laying off last year and, well..." She finished with a shrug.

Bret frowned. "I'm sorry to hear that. I know they've been late with the rent a lot, but it never bothered me. I didn't know it was that serious."

"The rent comes mostly from tips. She had two jobs for a while, but now they're back to living off just tips."

"Well, I guess selling the farm is going to be good for them, too," Bret said. "It'll give them a chance to get out of this place and start over."

Something about the way he said that disturbed Dani—so easily, almost callously. Did he really think people like the Skinners could just pull up roots and start over?

Dani said, "The worst part is, their money problems are only the tip of the iceberg. Their son, Jimmy, is in my class, and I gather there's real trouble at home. George Skinner wasn't sick tonight—he just doesn't go out anymore. He sits at home, with a bottle most likely, and watches television day in and day out."

Bret gave a small shake of his head.

"Come on, they're about to start the Christmas carols."

Bret groaned. "Dani, I'm freezing. Couldn't we just—"

"It's warm by the fire." She tugged on his arm.

"But Christmas carols! It's not even the middle of December! Can't we just skip it?"

She dropped his arm. "We certainly cannot! What's wrong with you any-

way? How'd you turn into such a boring old man?"

"Scrooge," he corrected. "My secretary calls me a scrooge, and it's a reputation I've worked hard to earn." But he compromised. "Couldn't we just sit in the car and listen?"

Dani decided after a while that a break in the tradition wasn't entirely bad. The windows were steamed up, turning the car into a cozy, private niche through which muted sounds of carolers were still audible. It was nice being alone with Bret, thinking, perhaps, a little too much about the past, but they were good memories.

She glanced across at him. "The first time you ever kissed me was here, do you remember?" She chuckled. "You were the first, you know."

"The first what?"

"Boy to kiss me."

"Yeah. You were the first girl I kissed, too."

She was surprised. "Really? I never knew that."

"That good, was I?" he replied smugly.

"As far as I was concerned, you were. Too bad you couldn't have been the first for other things, too."

A silence fell, and in its wake, an inexplicable awkwardness. They had always talked as freely about sex as they had about everything else. Why should this time be different?

It was Bret who broke the awkwardness, commenting, "I hope it got better over the years."

Dani relaxed. "Oh, sure. Doesn't everything? All it takes is finding the right guy."

Bret asked, "Like Todd?"

Dani looked at him.

She took a breath, and without look-

ing at him, said, "I've been seeing Todd for about eight months. He's—he's great, Bret, really smart and fun to be with, and he has this fantastic sense of commitment...to the world, the environment and society as a whole. He's the newspaper editor and you wouldn't believe the changes he's made. It's like a real newspaper now. He's on the town council, too. He's involved in everything. I mean, he's only been here two years, but already people know that they can count on Todd Renshaw if there's a job to be done."

She paused for breath, and Bret said guardedly, "He sounds like a terrific guy."

"He is," she agreed. "You'd really like him."

Bret waited.

"He's asked me to marry him," she said. "And I think I'm going to say yes."

BRET DROVE Dani home and rather absently refused her invitation to come inside for cocoa.

It would be rude to go to bed before his hosts arrived home, but suddenly, every bone in his body ached with fatigue. He scrawled a note—"Exhausted. Made myself at home. Thanks again! Bret"—and propped it up on the mantel. He made his way upstairs, wondering how much of his exhaustion was physical and how much was sheer emotional shock.

He couldn't remember exactly what he had said to Dani following her startling announcement—something clever about old-maid schoolteachers, most likely, followed by a witty assault of teasing. Pretty soon, she lost that uncomfortable, anxious look and started to

respond in kind. When he left her, she was laughing. Bret was reeling.

He kicked off his shoes before lying back on the bed, folded his arms beneath his head and stared up at the ceiling. Dani getting married. Well, what had he expected? That she would wait for him forever?

Wait for him... He frowned at the unexpected slip and couldn't imagine where it had come from. It wasn't as though he wanted to marry her or had ever even thought about it. But neither had he planned on her marrying somebody else. And he didn't want to lose his best friend, either.

This must have been exactly the way Dani felt when he told her he was getting married ten years ago.

And the irony was that a ten-year-old letter had brought him back here now, only to find the same scene being played out again—in reverse.

Climbing between the crisp-smelling cotton sheets, he managed a smile. Dani, getting married. He resolved to find out all he could about this man who thought he was good enough to be her husband. Bret felt it was a good thing he had come home when he had.

But sleep was a long time coming, and by then he wondered whether it had been a good idea to come home at all.

*

IT WAS AFTER three when he finally got away, and he could only hope Dani was still at school. He followed the sound of a slightly out-of-tune piano to the combination cafeteria/auditorium, and found her sitting at one of the child-size gray Formica tables in a child-size red molded plastic chair. Her attention was on the stage where a dozen or so chil-

dren were belting out a fair rendition of "Jolly Old St. Nicholas."

He moved toward her, glancing dubiously at the undersize chairs before sitting down beside her. He wrinkled his nose and said under his breath, "Spinach and yeast rolls. The place even smells the same."

Dani's face lit up as she turned to him. "Oh, Bret, good! I was hoping you'd stop by. We're auditioning for the Christmas play."

The music stopped, and Dani turned back to the stage. "That was great," she called. "Now, all the girls line up on the right side and all the boys on the left, and get ready to read your lines. Laurie, we'll start with you."

For the next half hour, Bret listened to a dozen or more students alternately shout, mumble and stammer their lines. When the last little girl resumed her place among her giggling schoolmates, Dani called out, "Okay, kids, that was great. We'll get together here and start practicing. Does everyone have a ride home?"

To judge by the clamor and excited rush for the door, everyone did.

When Dani was ready, Bret pushed open the heavy fire door and they walked into the bright, crisp afternoon.

"How about coming for dinner tonight?"

He glanced at her skeptically. "I don't know. Your mom is making apple dumplings."

She didn't break stride as she said, "Todd's coming, too."

Bret lifted one eyebrow. "And you want me to chaperone?"

Her look was one he knew too well to ignore. "I want you to be polite, charming and supportive. I mean it, Bret. Best behavior."

"Sounds like an offer I can't refuse." And then he hesitated. "I'm looking forward to meeting Todd, and I'll be nice to him, even if I hate him. I promise."

"You won't hate him," Dani said, slipping her arm through his. "And if you do, you don't have to be nice to him. Fair enough?"

He ruffled her hair as he walked her to her car. "You've got a deal."

BRET PUSHED ASIDE the lingerie that was scattered over Dani's bed and stretched out across it on his stomach. "You know," he said, "this is really nice."

He was looking out over the living area from the loft that was Dani's bedroom. Bret felt the faintest stirrings of envy. Dani had built a home; all he had was a house.

"All right, what about this?" She came out from behind a screen wearing a long, burgundy skirt and a cream-colored sweater with a wide, lace collar.

He turned over to look at her. "Looks fine." He was careful to keep his voice noncommittal because she looked more than fine.

"What about my hair? Up or down?"

He made a face. "Ah, Dani, don't make me do this. What do I know about hair?" She gave him a warning look. "Down. Wear it down. I don't know what the big deal is, anyway. You've already hooked the guy."

She bent over at the waist, brushing her hair forward. "You're the one who made me change the first dress—"

"It was too tight. I could see your panty line."

"And you're the one who made me snag my only pair of blue stockings— Why do I get the feeling you'd be just as happy if I served dinner in a chenille

bathrobe and bunny slippers? Speaking of dinner, will you run downstairs and put the rolls in?"

"You already did. Jeez, Dani, you'd think you were serving an eight-course dinner for a head of state. Why are you so rattled?"

"I am not rattled," she retorted. "This is the way I always get before a dinner party— Oh!"

"What?"

"My earring's caught!"

"Relax," Bret said, working on the delicate lace. Her cinnamon scent drifted up to him, warm and feminine. "Oh-oh."

"What?" She sat stiffly, not daring to move.

"The earring's free. My watch is caught."

"Oh, Bret, for heaven's sake!"

"Be still—"

They both froze at the sound of a knock on the door. A second later, a man who could only be Todd walked in.

The loft bedroom was perfectly visible from below, and though Bret felt a brief twinge of sympathy for Dani, it did not override the mischievous sense of satisfaction he felt for the view Todd must have had. There were the two of them, sitting on the rumpled bed amidst a pile of lingerie in what could very well be mistaken for an embrace. Anyone could be forgiven for misinterpreting.

But Todd merely grinned. "Am I early?" he asked.

He set the bottle of wine on the bar and started up the stairs.

"Hurry!" Dani ground out.

Bret got the watch disentangled just as Todd reached the loft.

Dani leapt to her feet. "Hi, Todd. I want you to meet Bret Underwood."

Bret got to his feet. "I guess you're wondering what's going on."

"With Dani," Todd replied easily, "I've learned not to ask. Good to meet you, Bret."

Bret accepted his handshake.

"The rolls!" She pushed past them.

"Come downstairs," she called back. "Make yourselves at home. Somebody pour the wine."

Todd grinned at Bret. "Great little hostess."

Bret got the glasses while Todd opened the wine.

"So, Bret," Todd said, handing him a glass of wine, "tell me about yourself."

"I think that's supposed to be my line."

"I anticipated as much," Todd replied, pulling out a folded sheet of paper, "and thought I'd save us both some time."

Bret had to fight back a grin. "I see Dani's dad has already given you the third degree."

"After the second date," Todd admitted.

"Did you pass?"

"The jury's still out."

Bret chuckled. "The Griffins aren't known for making hasty decisions."

"That's okay. I'm a patient man."

Bret turned to add another log to the fire he had built earlier, and Todd took the big, worn chair by the fireplace, with the natural ease of a man who had sat there many times before. Bret sat on the hearth.

There wasn't much room, and Bret accidentally upset one of Dani's collection of bells when he straightened out his legs.

He righted it, murmuring, "Bells, bells, bells..."

"Bret started me collecting them," Dani said, coming in with a plate of hors d'oeuvres. She sat on a cushion on the floor between the two men and first offered the plate to Todd.

"You were into bells?" inquired Todd.

"He was into cows." Dani thrust the hors d'oeuvres platter into Bret's hand and stood up, lifting a rusty cowbell from the mantel. "Bret gave me this when I was five. It was the first present a boy ever gave me."

"You were easily impressed," Bret admitted. "Why do you keep that filthy thing? It ruins your whole decor."

She made a face at him, and Todd reached for the bell. "Who did the artwork on the side?"

"Dani did," Bret said.

"Bret did," Dani answered and they laughed.

"Who knows?" Bret shrugged. "That was over twenty years ago. God, I never thought I'd be old enough to say that."

"Did any of us?" Dani put the cowbell back on the mantel, then resumed her place on the floor, smiling at him.

Bret resisted the impulse to slip his arm around her shoulders in a friendly hug and contented himself with smiling back at her.

The one awkward moment came at the end of the evening, when neither man could decide who was supposed to leave first. Bret would have accepted a signal from Dani if she had wanted to end the evening alone with Todd, but the point of the meeting would not be served until she and he had a chance to talk about it, so he made no move to go. And when Todd finally made some comment about the time, Bret knew he had read Dani correctly. She walked

Todd to the door, and Bret made sure that he could see them at all times. Todd, observing this, kissed Dani on the cheek and waved good-night to Bret.

"So." Dani leaned against the door, her cheeks flushed and her eyes bright. "What do you think?"

Bret lounged back on the sofa. "I think he's charming. Another hour, and we'd probably be picking out a china pattern together."

"Be serious."

"I am serious. He's a great guy."

"I knew you'd like him. Do you think he's good-looking?"

"Not my type."

"Well, I do. I like that swarthy, intellectual look."

"He's not swarthy. And his nose is too big."

Dani glanced at Bret critically. "Well, I think he's got interesting looks. Character."

"And I don't?"

"You're too blond, too tan, too...Hollywood. You need a flaw."

"I've got plenty of them. You just can't see them because you adore me so much." He reached for her hand and pulled her down beside him. "What is this, anyway? Todd's a nice guy, and looks aren't everything. What's really on your mind?"

She sighed as she leaned her head back against his shoulder. "Oh, Bret. Marriage..." She twisted her head around to look at him. "What's it like?"

He chuckled. "I'm the last person you should ask."

"But at least you did it," she insisted. "Why?"

"Oh, honey, I don't know." Absently, his hand caressed her shoulder. "Looking back, I really don't know."

I've got a better question for you. Why didn't you ever do it before?"

"Get married?" She shrugged and settled back against his shoulder again, curling her legs beside her on the sofa. "I don't know, lots of reasons. I guess I had to fight so hard to show my independence, it became sort of a habit. And I never found anybody I liked well enough to settle down with—or anyone who could put up with me for more than a few months. The time just never seemed right."

"And now?"

"I'm thirty-three years old," she said. "I'm tired of living alone. I want to care about someone who cares about me. I want to build a future with somebody, maybe have children, and that can't wait forever. I don't want to grow old alone."

Bret ruffled her hair. "Hell of a reason, kid."

"And I love Todd," she added. "I really do. Everybody says we make a perfect couple."

"It's looking better and better."

She sighed again. "I know how that sounds. I couldn't talk like this to anyone but you. I mean, everyone expects you to go into raptures about the man you're going to marry, but you have to be practical. You have to think about these things."

"But a little passion never hurt."

"I never said I wasn't passionate," she objected. "I just don't let it go to my head."

"And nothing scares Dani Griffin more than change."

"Right," she admitted.

He gave her shoulders a reassuring squeeze and lowered his chin to rest atop her hair. She smelled wonderful.

How good it felt to sit with her like this, holding her.

"You know," he said after a moment, "I didn't expect any of this when I came home. It seems like all my life, you're the one thing that never changed. The one thing I could always count on."

"Maybe that's not a good thing."

His voice was a little thick as he replied, "I don't think I'm the one you should be asking about this."

She turned to look at him and said softly, "You're the only one I can ask, Bret."

Her scent tantalized him, and his throat felt a little dry as he swallowed. He straightened up, forcing a smile. "Tell you what, then," he said. "Better let me think about it awhile." He kissed her on the forehead and stood. "Meanwhile, don't do anything rash."

"Who, me?"

She walked with him to the door, her arm looped around his waist. "Thanks for coming, Bret."

"Have you ever known me to refuse a free meal?"

"No, I mean..." She looked up at him, resting her hand lightly on his chest. "Thanks for coming home when you did. You always know, don't you?"

"We always know," he corrected gently.

She smiled. "And thanks for being nice tonight."

He opened the door and they stood for a moment in the cold night air. "I knew you'd like Todd," she told him. She brushed his lips lightly with a kiss. "He's a lot like you. Good night, Bret."

The scent of cinnamon and vanilla lingered on Bret's skin through the crisp walk home and followed him into his dreams.

"WHAT KIND OF PERFUME does Dani wear?" Bret asked Anne the next morning.

Her eyes twinkled. "Christmas shopping, are you?"

He didn't know where the question had come from, and now that the words were out, they almost seemed too personal. Besides, he hadn't given the first thought to what to give Dani for Christmas.

"Do you know," Anne said, "I don't believe Dani ever wears perfume. But I'll try to find out if there's any particular fragrance she likes, if you want."

"No, I guess not." Bret made his voice casual as he took a bowl from the counter and helped himself to some oatmeal. "Perfume's not the right kind of gift for Dani."

"Of course, this year, she might be easier to buy for. China and silver should be high on the list. How did dinner go last night?"

Bret brought the coffeepot to the table. "Not too bad. She didn't burn anything."

"You know that's not what I mean."

Bret sat down, choosing his words carefully. "Her new fella is a nice guy."

Anne sat next to him. "We think so, too."

"Miss Annie," Bret said abruptly, "could I ask you something?"

"Of course, dear."

"Do you remember when I got married?"

Her eyes twinkled again. "Why, yes. Why do you ask?"

Bret kept his eyes on the cup of coffee he was pouring. "I just wondered if you remembered how Dani felt about the whole thing at the time."

"I'm not sure I know what you mean," Anne said.

He pushed the coffee cup over to her and poured another for himself. "I mean... Dani never liked Laura, did she?"

Anne seemed to hesitate, and then she smiled. "Bret, you know you're the only brother Dani's ever had, and all her life, she's worshiped the ground you walk on. If she didn't like your wife, it was only because she didn't get to pick her out herself."

"She never told me," Bret said slowly. "And now, I think Dani wants me to tell her whether or not to marry Todd," he confessed suddenly.

"Ah." She nodded, sipping her coffee. "And the shoe's on the other foot."

"I guess it is."

"You're afraid she'll do what you tell her."

"Or she won't."

"No, she probably will. Or she'll at least think about it. Just out of curiosity," Anne said casually, "what would you tell her?"

And that was the hard part. He liked Todd. Dani liked Todd. The two of them seemed perfect for each other. So why was he holding back? Why was there any doubt in his mind at all?

The back door opened with a gust of cold air and Harold came in, his cheeks ruddy from the outdoors. "I've got the tractor hooked up," he announced, rubbing his hands. "Is everybody ready?"

Bret was grateful for the reprieve. "Where are you going?"

"Annual Christmas-tree expedition," Harold explained to Bret as he filled his coffee cup. "I'm sure Dani mentioned it to you. She reminded me only this morning to get out an extra jacket for you."

"No, she didn't mention it. She never tells me anything." But it didn't sound

too bad, tromping through the woods in search of a tree. It might even be fun—if Dani were along. "I'm surprised she didn't want to come," he added.

"Oh, she'll be here," Anne assured him.

"But it's a school day," Bret pointed out.

"Exactly."

*

THE BRIGHT yellow school bus that pulled up in front of the Griffin house forty-five minutes later disgorged twenty chattering, laughing, hyperkinetic eight-year-olds. Dani stood on the bus steps, calling out instructions while Anne and Harold greeted the children and tried to get them in order. Bret stood a little to the side, looking confused:

"All right," Dani called, "you know the rules. Has everyone got his partner? Remember, stay ten feet behind the tractor. And what happens to anyone who runs or leaves the group?"

The consensus was that the offender would have to wait in the bus.

"Jason, give Mr. Griffin the trees."

A proud little boy walked over to the wagon that was attached to the tractor and presented Harold with a flat of seedling pines. He made an appropriate fuss over them, set them in the wagon, then climbed onboard the tractor. "Wagons, ho!" he shouted.

The children loved that, and fell into place a safe distance behind as the tractor chugged down the path to the woods behind the house.

Anne took up her place on the left flank of the group, and Dani fell behind, waving to Bret to join her. "Surprise," she said, her eyes sparkling as he came up to her. "Sorry I forgot to mention

this last night, but I knew you wouldn't want to miss it."

"You didn't forget. You just knew if you warned me, I'd be sure to sleep late."

Within twenty minutes, half the girls had a crush on him and the boys were hanging on his every word.

"Do you know something?" Dani commented. "I think you'd make a good daddy."

"No, I wouldn't. I don't like kids."

"Oh, right." She smothered a grin. "Doesn't fit your Hollywood image, does it?"

"Right." Then he lifted his face, as a flake of snow drifted down. "And neither does thrashing through the woods in the middle of a snowstorm."

Dani laughed and slipped her arm through his. "I think it's romantic," she declared. "I hope it snows and snows!"

Bret smiled down at her, and there was a tenderness in his eyes, a simple, unabashed pleasure at her touch, that made her feel warm all over.

After the trees were loaded and Anne spread out a picnic of hot chocolate and sandwiches on the tailboard of the wagon, the tree-planting ceremony began.

Each year, a boy and a girl were chosen to do the honors, and this year Jimmy Skinner and Amy Carney had been elected. Jimmy complained, "How come we have to plant trees, anyway? There's nothing but trees everywhere you look. My daddy says you can't grow rocks out here for the trees."

"We always give back what we take from the land, Jimmy. You know that."

"But we only took three trees," Jimmy pointed out. "How come we have to plant six?"

"The other three trees are our Christmas gift to Mother Nature."

Bret looked at her for a moment, and though his expression was unreadable, it made her heart beat just a little faster.

Suddenly, she caught his hand. "Bret, look!"

He followed her upraised arm in some confusion. "What?"

"Mom, Dad," Dani called, "watch the kids for a minute, will you? We'll be right back." She tugged at Bret's hand.

"What?" he demanded. "Where are we going?"

"Mistletoe!" she exclaimed, and broke into a run, pulling him along beside her.

The mistletoe was nestled in the fork of a thick branch midway up an oak tree. Dani stopped beneath it, panting a little. "Right up there, do you see? Climb up and get it for me, will you, Bret?"

He turned an incredulous gaze on her. "Oh, yeah, right. Just shinny a hundred feet up a tree in the middle of a snowstorm."

"It's not a hundred feet!" Then she said, "Oh, all right, I'll do it." She reached for a low branch. "Just give me a boost."

He stared at her for a moment, then announced, "You're crazy." He grabbed hold of the branch himself. "I'll probably break my neck." He swung himself up.

"Be careful," Dani said, and he reached for a handhold on the next branch.

Dani stepped back, tilting her head to follow his progress. "Do you know the legend of the mistletoe?"

Bret strained to reach the cluster of mistletoe. Suddenly it came free and tumbled through the tree limbs, raining

berries and leaves and fragile, broken stems amidst Dani's shouts of delight.

She stretched her hands upward to catch it. "My hero!" she called.

Bret began to descend the branches, and in a moment, he sprang to the ground beside her.

"Well done!" she said, applauding him.

"You've got that junk all in your hair," he said.

"That's the mistletoe legend I was referring to," she replied pertly, reaching to pull the stems and leaves out of her hair.

"Do you mean the one about kissing?"

Their eyes met. Their fingers twined together lightly and did not move.

"Absolutely."

Their lips touched, as they had done many times before, but both of them knew that this was different.

His kiss went through her like something liquid and shimmering, flooding her with warmth, taking away her breath. Not the kiss of a friend, but a natural melding of man and woman, a chain reaction of swift-flowing sparks, of bodies coming together in perfect chemistry and muted wonder. Dani realized dizzily that she had waited all her life for this kiss.

Dani saw in Bret's eyes the same kind of slow, pleased astonishment that she felt, as though he couldn't believe what had just happened or understand why, as though he didn't know whether he should apologize or she should....

And she wouldn't. She turned away, brushing the last of the mistletoe out of her hair. "We'd better be getting back," she said brightly. "They'll send out a search party."

He didn't answer.

Then she said, with that same false, almost frenetic cheer, "Tree-trimming party tonight. First course at Mom's, dessert at my house. It's a tradition."

He hesitated, then forced a smile. "Right. Wouldn't miss it."

He dropped a hand atop her shoulder and together they walked back to the others.

THE AFTERNOON PASSED in a blur.

After school, Dani held a rehearsal for the play, but it wasn't easy to keep her mind on what she was doing. Finally, she went to call Todd. The sound of his voice should have been reassuring, but it wasn't.

"Christmas party tonight," she announced. "Want to come?"

"What? Nobody told me. Or did I forget?"

"Well, it's not really a party," she admitted. "Just tree trimming and eggnog with the folks. But I'd really like you to come, Todd."

There was a pause. "Ah, honey, you know I'd like to, but I was planning to work late."

Dani tried to feel disappointment. She really did. "No problem, I understand. We'll miss you."

"Not as much as I'll miss you. Say, how did I do last night?"

She blinked. "What?"

"With your friend. Did I pass?"

"With flying colors."

"Ha! The master at work!"

"Listen," she said quickly. "I've got a stage full of kids waiting for me. Call me this weekend, okay?"

"Sure thing. Bye, sweetheart."

She went back to the cafeteria, feeling no calmer than when she had left.

She loved Todd. She knew she did.

Why should anything be different just because Bret had kissed her? No...because they had kissed each other, willingly, thoroughly and as adults. Because they had wanted to. And they had enjoyed it.

BRET REMEMBERED very well the traditional tree-trimming buffet at the Griffin household and stayed busy in the kitchen with his own soon-to-be-famous eggnog recipe while Dani helped her mother tack evergreen boughs and bright red bows over the doorways and along the banister.

Then he carried the big bowl of eggnog into the living room and announced, "All right, friends and neighbors, prepare yourselves for the taste sensation of a lifetime!"

"After a buildup like that, how can we refuse?" declared Anne.

Harold agreed, "Sounds like just what the doctor ordered."

Dani picked her way carefully around the boxes of ornaments. "Don't believe a word of it. He used a mix."

"If you were a man, I'd call you out for that," Bret said.

Dani made a face at him.

He dipped the thick creamy mixture into cups, receiving the elder Griffins' compliments and Dani's noncommittal, "Not bad...for a California boy." They filled paper plates with selections from the buffet.

They began to sort the ornaments into two separate piles, and Dani said, "You look ten years younger."

He looked at her in surprise. "What?"

"Than when you first got here," she explained.

Her mother laughed, but agreed,

"She's right, Bret. I think the country air is good for you."

He shrugged. "I don't know about that. But I do know I've had more fun today than I have in a long time."

Then Anne said, "What do you usually do for Christmas, Bret?"

He chuckled and shook his head. "I go sailing," he confessed. "This friend of mine has a boat, and hardly anybody else is on the water on Christmas Day, so..."

"All by yourself?" inquired Anne.

"Usually."

"All alone in a boat on Christmas Day...that's the saddest thing I ever heard."

Dani grinned at Bret. "That's right, *Oliver Twist*, play it for all it's worth. Poor abandoned boy, all alone on some playboy's yacht, nothing but champagne and smoked salmon for his Christmas dinner, nothing but the false glitter of the distant lights of Catalina to guide him..."

Bret threw a handful of tinsel at her. "I'm starting to remember why I prefer spending Christmas by myself."

It was Christmas like a dozen others before it, and when the magical moment came and the tree was lit, Dani's hand slipped quite naturally into Bret's and she leaned her head against his shoulder.

*

BRET WALKED OVER to the Skinner place—his old house—by himself the next morning. It had been years since he had seen the place, and he didn't know what he had expected, but the flood of memories caught him off guard.

In his youth, the house had been painted bright yellow with green shutters. At some time over the years, the

color had been changed to a battleship gray, but even that was peeling badly.

When he started up the front steps, a chunk of badly set concrete fell out from the underpinning. How had the place gotten so run-down?

He pushed the bell, but it obviously didn't work. He knocked loudly and in a moment, the door opened.

The man on the other side was wearing a rumpled sweatshirt and a three-day growth of beard. His hair was greasy and his eyes suspicious.

Bret said, "Mr. Skinner? I'm Bret Underwood. I hope I'm not bothering you too early."

"Yeah, my wife said you might drop by. Come to throw us out, I reckon."

"No," Bret said. "I just wanted to talk to you for a minute."

"You might as well," Skinner said. "I don't have this month's rent and don't intend on getting it."

"I didn't come here to collect rent," Bret said patiently. "I just wanted to talk to you about my plans for the property."

"Guess I can't keep you out. It's your house."

Bret stepped inside, and the annoyance he felt at the state of disrepair became mitigated with dismay. There was a spindly-legged couch with a hole in one arm and a couple of molded plastic chairs of the kind Bret always associated with dentists' offices. The coffee table, a cheap mail-order piece, was scarred and watermarked.

"Wife's at work," Skinner said ungraciously. "Ain't no coffee."

Bret sat down uncertainly on one of the plastic chairs. Skinner had not offered to take his coat, and Bret was glad because it wasn't warm in the room.

George Skinner said, "Look, I know

what you come for. We'll be out by the first of the year. The wife, she's about had it with me. Said she'll stay till after Christmas, for the boy's sake, but after that..." He shrugged. "Reckon she'll be moving back with her folks, out in Minnesota. And me, I don't need a house if I don't have a family."

Bret did not want to hear this. He did not want to be here. But he managed to meet the other man's eyes and he said, "I'm sorry for your trouble. I know the land didn't turn out to pay like you hoped—"

Skinner waved a dismissing hand. "Weren't your fault. You never charged us a penny's rent for the land we worked. You've been more than fair."

"There's no hurry about leaving," Bret said. "I just wanted to let you know I'd be putting the place on the market. When it sells, I'll give you plenty of notice."

He got up, and Skinner walked him to the door. On the porch, Bret looked around, and said quietly, "I would've paid for the repairs."

The other man avoided his eyes. "I couldn't afford the raise in rent. We had a deal. I do the repairs, you keep the rent low. I did the best I could."

Bret felt small and miserable. He said, "I wouldn't have raised the rent."

He drew up his collar against the cold and started back home, thinking about the false glitter and tacky glamour of Los Angeles. He had never thought he would miss it, but it seemed to him a very welcoming place to be right then. It wasn't such a bad way to live.

BRET FOUND HAROLD warming up his pickup, preparing to go to work. After one look at Bret's glum expression, he

said, "Yeah, I figured that's where you'd gone. I'm sorry about the shape it's in, son. I would've talked to you about it sooner, but when you said you were going to sell..." He shrugged.

Then Bret spoke abruptly, "Do me a favor, will you? Check the place out and see what it needs. Whatever it takes, just make out a bill. And hire Skinner to help you, whatever the going rate is. Tell him...the real-estate company is paying for the work."

Harold grinned. "That's the spirit. I'll take care of it today."

Bret found Anne in the kitchen, cleaning up the breakfast dishes. Never had home felt so warm.

"Craig Notions called," she announced as he hung up his coat.

Bret stifled a groan. "I should've checked in before now. I knew something would go wrong."

"He said it wasn't urgent."

Bret went into the living room and settled back in a wing chair, using his credit card to make the call.

"Do I have news for you!" Craig said boisterously. "I have all but closed the deal on your Clayville property, sight unseen. Is that a stroke of genius or what?"

Bret was stunned. "What are you talking about?"

"Inushu Electronics is looking to open a new plant in the Midwest. All they need is a highway, a couple of hundred acres and a fairly central location from which to draw their labor force. And guess what I just happened to have for sale? They're interested. They're sending a rep down next week to draw up a report."

The only thing Bret could think of for the moment was that, if the Japanese were going to build a plant on the prop-

erty, there was no need to fix up the house. They'd only bulldoze it.

Still, he was cautious. "Then it's hardly a done deal, is it? I mean, they've got to be looking at other places."

Craig sounded exasperated. "But this is the one they're going to buy. Don't overdo the gratitude, will you? You're embarrassing me."

"Sorry, Craig. It sounds great. It's just that..."

"Yeah, I know, you always were a conservative son-of-a-gun. So let's just say this is an early Christmas present. I'll get back with you as soon as we're ready to come out and look at the property."

For a long moment after he had disconnected, Bret sat there, trying to let it sink in. If it worked out, it could be a very good thing for everyone concerned, so why should he feel the least bit uneasy about it?

There was no reason, he decided firmly. And, as though to prove it to himself, he jumped up and started toward the kitchen. "Hey, Miss Annie!" he called. "Guess what?"

OVER THE NEXT WEEK, Bret was plunged into such a frenzy of Christmas gaiety that he couldn't help suspecting a conspiracy. He was recruited to help collect canned goods for the poor, make Christmas wreaths for the hospital and distribute fruit baskets at the nursing home. People he hadn't seen in twenty years invited him to Christmas parties and skating parties and hayrides.

He ignored, as much as he could, the business with Inushu.

A week ago, Dani demanded simply, "Bret, why don't you stay?"

Why don't you stay? His head had

reeled with the implications of that question for an hour or more. And it wasn't just the words, but what lay behind them. She had wanted to say more, he was sure of it. *Why don't you stay and...*

What? Be an usher at her wedding? Play poker with Todd on Thursday nights and watch her children grow up calling him Uncle Bret? Could he do that?

That was why he was so thoroughly determined to enjoy this Christmas. He knew he would never come home again.

He kept himself so busy during that week that he rarely saw Dani, and never alone. He wouldn't have gone shopping in Centerville with them on Saturday except that Miss Annie begged him to come.

At eleven o'clock, they met up with Todd and Dani. "Okay," Dani declared, "now it's boys against the girls."

Todd and Bret watched them hurry off, then crossed the street and entered a café.

"This café is pretty impressive," Bret said when the coffee arrived. "Dani said you had something similar in mind for Clayville."

Todd shrugged. "Not the motif, but the idea. Tourist attractions work best in clusters. But we haven't even come up with an idea we can all agree on yet, much less starting to put it into practice."

"Put Dani on the town council," Bret suggested lightly, "she'd turn it into a Christmas village."

"Actually, that's not such a bad idea, and we've talked about it. The trouble is, there's no one on the council—in the whole town, really—who has the expertise to put a plan like that into action. Or any kind of plan."

Bret nodded, sipping his coffee.

"Well, the first thing you'd have to do is look into alternative financing. Take this place, for example—it all didn't just spring up full grown and polished overnight. You'd have to set up a standards-and-practices committee and a financial overseer, but you'd be amazed how much funding is available for landmark buildings, and there are definite tax advantages. Of course, what you'd really need is a program administrator."

Todd was smiling at him so complacently that Bret knew he had been trapped. He dropped his gaze. "Of course," he said, "none of that is really my field."

"No," agreed Todd. "But it's too bad we don't have a few men like you on the council, who aren't afraid of change and know how to get things done. Then again, it'll all be academic if your sale goes through."

Bret said nothing.

"Do you know," Todd said after a moment, "I like you. Sometimes, I wish you would stay. But there's one problem. Dani."

Bret held his silence, but his hand tightened on the coffee cup. Todd's gaze wandered around the room.

"I knew you'd be trouble. So here's the deal," he said. "I'm thirty-five years old, and the kind of husband Dani needs. I know I would be good for her. She's already good for me. I've loved her from the first minute I met her, but all I want is her happiness. So what I want to know now is this—do you love her enough to let her go?"

And there it was. Clear, simple and out in the open. The reason, ultimately that he had come back: if he lost Dani now, it would be forever. How could Bret keep her from doing what was best

for her? If he loved her, why would he even want to?

But how could he let her go?

He met Todd's eyes, and responded softly, "Do you?"

For a long moment, the two men looked at each other; stalemate. Then Todd glanced at his watch. "Well," he said, "I still have a few things to pick up. Will you watch the packages?"

Bret picked up his cup. "Yeah. No problem."

Todd stood. "So," he said, "I guess there's nothing more to say except...may the best man win."

The bell over the door clanged as Todd left, and Bret sank back against the booth. "Yeah," he murmured. "That's what I'm afraid of."

UNEXPECTEDLY AND TOTALLY unpreventably, Dani's eyes flashed with tears.

Her mother gestured to a bench outside where they sat in silence for a time while Dani struggled to regain control of herself. "Honey, what are you going to do?" she asked tenderly.

Dani swallowed hard. "Oh, Mom, I feel so bad. Todd is so wonderful, and I can't hurt him. I thought we had a future together, I really did, and you know I've had a crush on Bret since I was—was a kid—" Here her voice broke.

"Does Bret know?"

Dani shook her head mutely.

Anne was silent for a time, and then she said, "You're right. Todd is a wonderful man. I know that he adores you. But it's more than a crush you feel for Bret, isn't it?"

Dani looked at her mother. "Yes," she whispered. "And it's been going on so long that I—I hardly realized when he stopped being my friend and started

being the only man I've ever loved.... But he doesn't feel the same way about me, and even if he did, he would never tell me because..."

Anne nodded. "Because of Todd."

"And other things." Dani looked down at the sidewalk. "Mom, do you think it's wrong the way I feel? What should I do?"

Her mother smiled, and slipped her arm around Dani's shoulders. "No, darling," she said. "I don't think it's wrong. As for what you should do, I wish I could tell you. You'll make the right choice, Dani," she said. "But you have to make it alone."

BRET HELPED the women carry their packages inside, then made himself scarce as they went upstairs to giggle and whisper over their purchases.

He was making a pot of coffee when the phone rang. "I'll get it!" he called upstairs.

Craig's voice boomed over the line, "Inushu is ready to make an offer."

Bret's voice was flat. "How much?"

"Well, let's just say I threw out a figure of about twice the appraised value and they didn't blink an eye."

Bret sank back against the wall. His throat was dry.

"Now, the project developer wants to go over the site personally, so how is next Wednesday? We'll be coming in by private plane."

"Thanks, Craig."

For a long time after he'd replaced the receiver, Bret stood there, trying to take it all in.

Bret did not know how long Dani had been standing at the door before he sensed her presence. He gestured toward the telephone.

"My real-estate agent," he explained.

Her voice was cautious. "You have an offer?"

"A whopper. They want to finalize the deal as early as Wednesday."

Dani crossed the room. "So they're serious. This could really happen."

"It *has* happened. I guess a lot of people around here are going to be pretty upset with me." *Including you*, he thought. *Mostly you*.

"Just because they made an offer doesn't mean you have to accept."

"You haven't heard the offer yet. It's good business, but it's more than that. Damn it, Dani, this is progress. It's good for the town—it may be the only chance this town has."

"You're not doing this for the town!" she cried. "You're doing it because you want to put as much distance between you and the past as you can, even if you have to destroy the past to do it."

"That's not true," he said hoarsely.

"You never *cared* about things the way I do!" she cried. "I always thought you did, but I was wrong."

"I cared," he said fiercely. "I've always cared." And suddenly, he realized he was not talking about the land or his hometown or any of the things from his past...or perhaps he was. Perhaps all of those things and Dani were inextricably mixed. He said quietly, "We were always different, Dani. I guess the only thing we ever had in common was each other."

He turned away, looking out the window.

"When I was a kid," he said, "it was all so simple. There was so much to do, so much to explore. I didn't find what I expected to, and maybe now it doesn't seem as important as it once did, but somebody once said the only thing

worse than wanting and not having is not knowing what you want."

Her voice was tight and strained behind him, but strangely low. "You know what you want, Bret. You're just afraid to ask for it."

He drew in his breath but couldn't release it. His chest was tight, and his blood was racing. He did know what he wanted and he would never, ever ask for it.

Dani moved forward. She reached out her hand to touch his arm, but let it drop. "You have choices, Bret. You always have choices."

"Yes," he agreed huskily. "I have choices. But none of them appeals to me."

"I guess I'll be going back to LA after my meeting Wednesday. I know I said I'd stay for Christmas, but it's really a bad time to be away from the office. All I really came here for was to check out the property, you know." The words tasted like poison on his tongue. "Of course," he added, "I'll come back for your wedding."

"My wedding?" The words were repeated blankly.

He turned, smiling. "You did mean to invite me, didn't you?"

Her face was as blank as her voice. "Of course, I'll invite you. But I never—I didn't say—"

He deliberately deepened the smile. "Come on, Dani, you've tortured the guy long enough. You know you're going to marry him. Give the poor fellow a break. Say yes."

"Is that what you want me to do?" she said.

He shrugged. "What I want has nothing to do with it. But if you want my advice, you're a fool to let this one get

away. Guys like Todd don't come along every day."

"No," she whispered. "They don't."

He turned for the door as casually as possible. "I think I'll go give your dad a hand."

"Bret."

He almost made it. He looked back.

Her face still looked stunned, but her voice was almost normal. "I came down to see if you had anything you wanted me to wrap for you."

"Thanks. I'll bring them up to your place later."

She nodded, and he left as quickly as he could.

HE HAD DONE the right thing. Bret breathed deeply of the sharp, icy air. *Do you love her enough to let her go?*

The ax was stuck in the chopping block, but Harold Griffin had apparently abandoned the chore. Bret picked up the tool, centered a log and began to swing with a vengeance.

Soon a mild voice spoke up behind him. "You fixing on killing something, son, or you figure you just need the exercise?"

Bret staggered back, panting, and let the ax drop as he turned to face Harold. He began to gather up the splintered wood. "I got an offer on my property."

"Good for you."

"It is good," Bret said tightly. "It's good for everybody. Your property values will go sky high."

"Yeah, I reckon they would, if I had a mind to sell."

"People will be moving in from all over. You won't be able to keep up with the business at your store. And if Todd Renshaw thinks he's got a newspaper now, just wait until he has something to

really write about. Circulation will double, just like the population."

"Yep," agreed Harold. "Sounds like it's going to be good for everybody. And two young people couldn't ask for a better wedding gift than the future you've got plotted out for them."

Bret dumped a load of kindling into the wood box.

"Nobody's forcing you to sell, you know," Harold went on. "I've often wondered, Bret, why don't you just come back here and settle down?"

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm in love with Dani." Bret hadn't meant to say that; he looked up at Harold, stunned.

"Well," he said mildly, "it's about damn time."

Bret felt an enormous sense of relief. He had said it, if not to her, then to someone. He didn't have to hide it anymore.

Harold rocked back slightly on his heels. "We've been expecting this for some time now. About twenty years, I'd say. But let me see if I've got this straight. You're in love with my daughter, so you figure the best thing you can do is make her mad by selling the old homestead. Then you'll go on back to California without her." He nodded. "Makes sense."

Bret said, "There's nothing else I can do. Dani's life is here. Mine's on the coast."

"What does Dani have to say about all this?"

"Nothing. I haven't told her."

"I can't say that's the smartest thing I've heard."

Bret shook his head. "She's in love with Todd."

"Maybe. Maybe not. But she's got a

right to know and to make up her own mind."

FROM HIS WINDOW Bret could see Dani's house.

She's got a right to know....

He went over to the small writing desk and opened a drawer. Bret tore a sheet off an old ruled notepad and picked up a pen.

Dear Dani,

I know it doesn't make any difference now, but I love you. I love you as a man loves a woman, and I want you like a man wants a woman, and I think I have for years. I wish it could have been different for us, but I only want you to be happy.

Please believe that.

Your best friend,
Bret

He looked at the paper for a long time, aching inside.... And then he folded it, tore it neatly in half, folded and tore it again. He opened his hand and watched the pieces drift into the trash can.

*

DANI HAD NOT spent an evening alone with Todd since Bret had come home.

"I was surprised Bret wasn't at the party tonight," Todd commented, helping her off with her coat.

"He doesn't know everyone in town," she replied, then added, "Besides, it's getting a little awkward for him, explaining about the land deal." Refusing to let the conversation focus on

Bret, she said brightly, "Think you can get a fire stirred up?"

"At your service. How about something to drink?"

"Wine or coffee?"

"Wine, I think."

She hurried to the kitchen, and once there, she braced her hands on the counter, taking a deep breath, trying to steady her nerves.

Bret was right. Men like Todd didn't come along every day and she was lucky to have found him. She wanted to get married, to have children and grandchildren...and Bret did not want her.

She poured the wine and came back into the living room. Suddenly, she wanted to be held, needed to be taken into strong, loving arms and kissed and stroked.

She crossed the room, dropping onto the hearth rug beside him. He took the glass of wine from her, smiling. "Did I tell you how pretty you look tonight?"

"Several times."

"So Bret's leaving after he makes the deal Wednesday."

Dani took a sip of her wine. "That's right."

"I've been looking into the Inushu plans. I'm starting to come up with some interesting information."

She shook her head. "I don't want to talk about electronics or Bret, not tonight. I don't care, not about any of it."

He smiled. "Well, I can't believe you don't care. But it is nice not to talk about Bret for once."

He lifted his hand, encircling her neck, his expression tender in the firelight. Dani thought he was going to kiss her. She wanted to kiss him. She was sure she did.

And then he let his hand trail down her arm. He said, "I brought a little

something for you to put under your tree." He reached into his pocket. "But I think I'd rather have you open it now."

"Oh, Todd, it's too early for presents," she said, then stopped as he drew out a small, square box wrapped in gold paper.

Dani's heart pounded as she took it from him. She knew what was inside.

Visions of bridal showers, flower girls and white lace were skating through her head as she tore off the gold wrapping and lifted the lid. The solitaire gleamed against the blue velvet, catching the glow of the fire and the tree lights. All engagement rings should be seen by firelight, she thought. It was perfect.

The ring glowed like a promise, and Todd's hand was warm and loving on her arm. She reached to slip the ring onto her finger. But she couldn't.

The tears burned her eyes, trembling on her lashes. "I'm sorry," she whispered, and closed the lid.

The fire popped, and outside an icy branch creaked in the wind. The silence between them was long and aching. Then Todd said, "Overplayed my hand, huh?"

She swallowed hard and shook her head.

Dani stood, hugging her arms, pressing her lips tightly together to stop the tremors, but still, her voice was broken. "Oh, Todd, I've been so unfair to you. I didn't mean to be, I swear I didn't. I always knew I wasn't sure, but I never knew why until... Still, I wanted to marry you, I wanted to believe we could be happy together, but it can't be. I know that now. And I can't marry you when I'm in love with another man."

Todd said, "Well, thank you for that, at least."

He stood up slowly, but Dani couldn't turn to look at him. Todd laid his hand lightly on her shoulder. "I had to know, Dani," he said. "I couldn't go on like this."

She watched as he bent to pick up the box and turned toward the door. Then he stopped. A strangely sad half smile curved his lips as he said, "You know something? If you would've had me, I think I would have married you anyway."

Dani listened to the sound of his retreating footsteps, to the soft closing of the door. Then she couldn't fight it any longer. She began to sob, and she cried far, far into the night.

BLUE SKIES were spilling in through her window when Dani awoke late the next morning.

She moved her eyes around the room, trying to take comfort in the familiarity of her surroundings. The Christmas cards that Bret had helped her string along the loft railing, the mistletoe...the Christmas cactus, as withered as her dreams, on her bedside table. But she still had her home, her family, the friends she loved.

She shivered a little as her stockinged feet struck the bare floor.

She started for the shower, but on her way, she picked up the cactus, then dropped it into the trash can. The plant was as dead as it was ever going to get.

The hot shower restored her body, taking the puffiness out of her eyes and the soreness out of her muscles, but nothing could take away the ache she felt inside.

Someone was knocking on her door when she came out of the shower, wrapped in a terry-cloth robe. Her heart

started pounding as she gripped the banister.

She went down the stairs quickly, but when she opened the door, a stranger in a postal uniform stood there, smiling at her. "Morning, miss. Package for you." He offered her a medium-size box, with the rest of the mail stacked on top of it.

She stared at him. "You're not the usual mailman."

The stranger's blue eyes twinkled with good humor, and his cheeks were as red as cherries in the cold. A shock of white hair encircled his head beneath his cap, and he looked like a thoroughly cheerful fellow. "I'm just helping out for the holidays." He tipped his hat to her. "Have a Merry Christmas, now."

"Thank you. You, too."

She flipped through the other envelopes in a desultory fashion. One caught her eye. She opened the envelope and pulled out a single sheet of lined notepaper.

Dear Dani,

I know it doesn't make any difference now...

THE WORDS from the old song, "California Dreaming," were going through Bret's head as he crossed the drive toward Dani's house. But he wasn't dreaming about California. If he dreamed about any place from now on, it would be here, where she was.

One hand was shoved deep into his coat pocket, with the other, he carried a snow shovel slung over his shoulder. Harold had wanted to make sure Dani's porch and drive were cleared of snow before it turned to slush and then refroze into dangerous ice. Bret had volunteered

for the job. He knew he couldn't go forever avoiding Dani.

He had almost reached Dani's porch and was debating whether to go up and knock or just get on with his work when, suddenly, the door flew open and Dani burst out. She was wearing a bathrobe and her eyes were blazing.

He dropped the shovel. "Dani, what's wrong?"

"You dirty, rotten, lying *snake*!"

She drew back her arm to strike him, and it was only instinct that caused him to catch it, fending off the blow. "You lied to me!" she shouted at him. "Do you know what you put me through? Do you have any idea?"

"What are you talking about?"

"*This!*" She raised a closed fist at him and he saw that it concealed some kind of crumpled paper.

He grabbed her arm and half pushed her up the steps; slamming the door behind him.

She shoved the paper at him again, and this time he snatched it from her. "Where did you get this?" he demanded.

"What does it matter where I got it? Did you leave it in my mailbox? Bret, why couldn't you just *tell* me?"

He looked up at her. "I tore it up. It was a secret, like we used to—"

"A secret!" Her voice had gone from righteous outrage to despair. "Why would you want to keep it a *secret*?"

"I tore it up..." he repeated dully. "I threw it away..." But there were no tears in the letter, no tape, not even any creases, except the ones Dani had made.

"Oh, Bret, I've been in love with you most of my life!" Her voice broke as she continued. "Oh, God, I did everything but *beg* you to love me back! And these last weeks—you *knew*, what was

happening between us, you knew how I felt, and yet you—"

"You shouldn't have this," he said, looking at the paper. "There is no way you could have this."

"Bret, are you listening to me?" she cried. "I love you!"

"Dani." It was hardly a breath, and when he reached out his arms, she was in them. He could feel her shaking, and he held her tighter.

He felt a surge of strength and hot desire, a wash of weakness and disbelief, and he thought, *This is it. This is why I came home, this is all I ever wanted.* None of it made sense. He couldn't understand the miracle that had brought her to him, nor fully believe it was real, but it was, for the moment, enough that she was here, holding him, loving him. He looked down at her.

"Dani," he said hoarsely, "this is not a good idea," and he stepped back. "Just because I—I never should have written it down, and you never should have read it. I didn't want to mix up your life, I didn't want to cause trouble. Todd..."

She shook her head firmly. "I gave Todd his ring back last night, before I even read your letter. I thought I had lost both of you, that's why I was so mad at you.... If I had known you felt the same way I did, I could have done the right thing a lot sooner. Oh, Bret, we've wasted so much time!"

"Years," he agreed softly. He made himself look away from her, half turning. He tried to take a breath, and found it more difficult than he anticipated. "Dani, this is...wow." He ran his fingers through his hair. "This isn't easy."

"Let it be easy," she whispered. "Things have always been so easy and right between us. I've wanted you for so

long, and I hurt for you so much. Don't make it hurt now."

He turned her into his arms, meaning to comfort her. But instead, his mouth was on hers, drinking in her startled breath of surprise, tasting her, drawing her in and letting himself drown in her, and it was easy and so right. She made him dizzy; she took away his power of thought.

He smiled, and said huskily, "You're not wearing anything under that robe, are you?"

She shook her head, and held his gaze. "Are we going to make love, Bret?"

His heart lurched and pounded. Make love...with Dani. He traced the shape of her lips with an unsteady finger. "I don't see how we can help it."

She closed her eyes. "Me, either," she whispered. "Let's go upstairs."

Dani had climbed those stairs with Bret dozens of times before, but never had the walk seemed so long. She wondered if they would have changed their minds before they arrived.

He dropped a slow, gentle kiss on her forehead, then stood up and began to remove his clothes.

She had always known Bret was an attractive man, but never in such a personal way.

She lifted her hand, trailing her fingers down his collarbone, spreading her palm over the expanse of one pectoral muscle, then sliding it down over his ribs and his waist.

He parted her robe, and she caught her breath as his eyes moved over her, followed by his hands, pushing the sleeves of the robe off her arms.

He smothered a groan and stretched out beside her, drawing her into his arms. Their mouths met in a single surge

of hunger and need. With an eager, almost desperate greed, Dani's hands moved over him.

"Dani," he murmured, "look how well we fit together."

"Yes," she whispered, dizzy with wonder.

He shifted above her; her legs opened to receive him, and in the space of one long, suspended heartbeat, he filled her.

She moved her hands over his back, she threaded her fingers into his hair. She rose to meet him, and their rhythms became more urgent, a spiral of need and wanting that went beyond physical union. And as the power of fulfillment burst upon them, they knew and they held and they treasured what had been missing for all their lives. It was right. It was perfect.

Sunshine danced over their perspiration-slickened bodies, warmer than summertime as it was magnified through the high window. They lay on their backs close together, Dani's ankle curved over one of his. Bret's arm rested across her stomach. She could hear Bret's breathing; she could feel the glow of his body heat spreading over her and through her, still a part of her. She opened her eyes, experiencing a renewed thrill at seeing him naked beside her, at discovering his eyes adoring her.

She threaded her fingers through his, turning her face on the pillow so that it was only inches away from his. "So what do you think?" she said softly. "Are we good together?"

He released a long, low breath and moved his arm to encircle her waist, drawing her close. "Ah, Dani, I could spend the rest of my life making love to you."

And they would, Dani thought. They had the rest of their lives to do just that.

"Oh, Bret." She cupped his face. "Why did it take you so long to tell me? Why did you have to keep it a secret?"

His eyes sobered. "Maybe," he answered, "for the same reason you kept it a secret ten years ago."

She looked confused. "What?"

"You wrote it down," he reminded her. "The night before I got married. That's why I came home, Dani. I finally got your letter."

"My letter? But...but I threw it away. I'm sure I did..."

"Just like I threw mine away."

"All those years ago..." She shook her head. "But that's not possible. Bret, you must be mistaken. There's no way..."

He smiled, slipping one hand beneath her, stroking her hip. "Do you know what I think we've got here?"

"What?" she whispered.

"A miracle," he answered.

And as she felt him move against her, sliding slowly inside, she wrapped her arms around him, and she thought with wonderment, *Yes. A miracle...*

WHEN BRET AWOKE the next morning, a hazy early sunlight was filtering through the loft window and Dani was sleeping in his arms.

He grasped her shoulder and shook her gently. "Hey," he said softly. "Wake up. It's morning."

"I know." She stretched up her arms, encircling his neck, looking up at him with drowsy, love-sated eyes. "It was wonderful sleeping with you, Bret. Not just making love, but sleeping together."

"I know." He brought his face to her hair, inhaling deeply. She smelled in-

credible. "Like we've been doing it for years."

She bent her head back. "Can I ask you something?"

"What?"

"Do you always sleep in the nude?"

"Not always. Sometimes I wear my shorts."

"Don't you get cold?"

He kissed her on the nose. "Not in California."

And there it was, the moment they had both in their secret ways been dreading, the subject they had been trying to avoid. He saw the shadow touch her eyes and sat up abruptly. "Wait," he said, "I almost forgot. I have a Christmas present for you. I was going to give it to you yesterday, before I—"
Before he left town.

He reached over for his pants, digging in the pocket for a gift-wrapped box. Dani smiled as she took it. "The last time I got an early Christmas present, it made me cry. For about eight hours."

He ruffled her hair gently. "This one won't make you cry, I promise. At least, not for eight hours."

She looked up at him, suddenly stricken by a superstitious fear. "Can't it wait for Christmas? It's just that giving it to me now makes me think that...well, you might not be here for Christmas."

"I'll be here," he assured her quickly. "I'll probably have to go home for a little while," he went on carefully, "to take care of the final paperwork on the sale. And I need to check in with the office. But I'll be back."

"To stay?" She spoke hesitantly.

He looked away and didn't answer at first. "I've been thinking. When the electronics plant opens, I can make a bid for the security contract. That doesn't

mean I'll get it, but even if I don't, if there's one thing I do know, it's electronics. I can get a job."

The relief that went through Dani came in waves, uncertain and hopeful. They could work it out.

But he wasn't finished. "Honey, we've got to be realistic. A thousand things could go wrong. At best, it'll be a year or two before the plant is even open, and in the meantime, I have a business to run. I can't afford to keep two households. You'll have to come back with me for a while."

Of course. It was the only possible solution. She couldn't let him go, not after all the wasted years; he couldn't stay here, not without a job. But... "California?" she managed, in a tight voice.

A flash of impatience crossed his eyes. "It's not Jupiter. They've got schools there, hundreds of them. You can get a job anywhere. And it'll only be for a little while—"

"Or maybe not," she said softly.

For reality spread itself before her. This was not a daydream, and even miracles like the one she had found with Bret were not always perfect. He was talking about an entirely new way of life, leaving behind the only home she had ever known, her family, her friends, the children she loved and the people she had grown up with. Herself. She would be leaving behind *herself*.

He stood up, his expression bleak and weary. "I'm sorry, Dani. I don't have any other solution."

After dressing, he went down the stairs and out the door.

Dani pressed her lips together tightly. There had to be an answer. There just *had* to be.

Her eyes fell on the small wrapped package on the bed, and she picked it

up. She knew she shouldn't open it. She knew it would make her cry.

Slowly, she drew out the charm bracelet with its single silver bell and held it up. On the side of the bell, much like another bell from long ago, was an engraving: *BU + DG*.

She had been right. It made her cry.

BRET LET HIMSELF into the house through the enclosed back porch.

All these years of loving Dani without even knowing it, of needing her, depending on her... was he going to throw it all away now because of one stupid argument about where they were going to *live*?

He straightened up slowly, a weight dropping from his shoulders. He *had* been stupid. Both of them had. Each of them had been deliberately, although not entirely consciously, reenacting the past. But they had found what they wanted. Now they simply had to decide whether they were strong enough to accept it.

He opened the kitchen door and went inside.

The room smelled of perking coffee and cinnamon rolls. Miss Annie, in a bright, flowered robe, turned from the stove and smiled at him.

"Good morning, Bret. Coffee's almost ready."

The warmth of home washed over him, and he stood there for a moment, feeling dazed but strengthened inside with a growing certainty. Then he murmured, "Umm, excuse me, Miss Annie. I've got to make a phone call."

Craig Notions' voice, heavy with sleep, answered on the third ring.

"Listen, Craig. I want you to cancel the Inushu deal. I've decided not to sell."

"I might be one of the fastest wheeler-dealers in Southern California, my boy, but even I don't get my clients in bed with companies that are about to go bankrupt."

"What?"

"What's the matter, don't you get newspapers out in the sticks? It was all over the *Wall Street Journal* yesterday. Looks like they were trying to keep their real financial picture secret until they could fatten up their assets a little, hoping for a takeover. Yours wasn't the only deal they were trying to rush through before the end of the year."

Bret sat back in his chair. "Do you mean—if I had made the sale, there never would have been any electronics plant?" No new jobs, roads, county revenues....

"Hardly. The whole company would probably have fallen victim to some corporate raider. You might've gotten your money, and you might not have, but it would've been years, and maybe ten cents on the dollar. As for the property, who knows?"

Bret was stunned.

"I'm surprised you don't know more about this than I do. Seems the whole investigation was stirred up by a newspaperman down your way. Can you beat that? The best financial journalists scooped by some hick reporter who didn't want an electronics plant built in his backyard."

"Todd." But Craig didn't hear.

"Well, I'm sorry it worked out this way." Craig's voice was heavy. "Merry Christmas, as they say."

"Yeah." Bret's lips began to twitch with the beginnings of a grin. "Merry Christmas."

DANI TOOK the familiar path through the woods, pushing aside ice-stiffened branches, following the footprints in the snow. They ended at the edge of the woods; and there Bret stood, hands in pockets, gazing at the house beyond.

He must have heard her footsteps, but he did not turn. They stood together in silence for a while, sharing the view. Then Dani said, "Mom told me about the land deal."

Bret's voice was heavy. "You and Todd were right all along."

"You called off the sale before you even knew about the bankruptcy."

"Still, it was a close call. If it hadn't been for Todd..."

"Another Christmas miracle," she said, coaxing a smile from Bret.

But his eyes were a little sad. "We've about used up our share, haven't we?" He shook his head a little.

Dani squeezed his arm bracingly. "So we go to California. I'm about due for a change. All this snow and slush is starting to get on my nerves."

He turned to her, tenderness and wonder in his eyes. "You'd do that?"

"You'd do the same for me," she told him simply. "As a matter of fact, you just did."

He drew her into a slow, loving embrace. "Ah, Dani," he murmured into her hair. "You'd hate it in California. I hate it there. I just wish—"

"Shh..." She lifted her hand to touch his face. "There's plenty of time to make plans. It can wait till after Christmas."

Their lips met in a long, deep kiss that spread its glow like radiant embers, full of promise. Yes, they had had their share of miracles. They didn't need any more.

He could feel a slight reciprocal ten-

sion in Dani's body. "Do you remember," she ventured, "your dad used to say if there was a profit in rocks and pine trees..."

"Not only pines," he heard himself murmuring, "but spruce and fir..."

She lifted her eyes to him, and they reflected his own shock and wonder. It was so absurdly simple.

"I don't know anything about tree farming," he said.

"George Skinner does!" she declared.

"If he would stay on and manage it for me—"

"And not just trees, a nursery—"

"It doesn't have to stop here. The

other farmers in the county have hundreds of acres going fallow—"

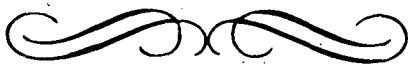
"A co-op!" she cried. "Evergreens will grow anywhere! We could ship all over the country!"

They were in each other's arms, laughing, hugging, holding on tight. "I could sell the business," he said, "and maybe make enough to get us through the lean years. But, honey, it's a hell of a chance—"

"And about time we took one," she replied.

She went into his arms again, and he buried his face in her hair. "Sometimes," he murmured, "I guess we have to make our own miracles."

And Dani smiled. "Most of the time," she said.



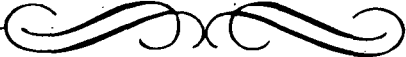


EMILIE RICHARDS

Sweet Sea Spirit



Paralegal Sandy McDonald doubted that a prominent lawyer like Tyler Hamilton would ever fall in love with a free spirit like her. But if there was one thing Sandy couldn't resist, it was a challenge...and Tyler Hamilton promised that...and then some.



A glossy-leaved magnolia tree towered over the front porch of the sprawling Georgia farmhouse. A teenage boy shimmied and clawed his way up to its highest branches.

"See if you can beat this!" he called.

"With my hands tied behind my back!" A young woman stood with feet planted wide apart. "I was climbing trees when you were still in diapers!"

Beside the young woman stood the tree climber's twin brother. "You did it, Randy," shouted the other boy. "You beat the record!"

"Of course," Randy said. "Care to show us what you're made of, Sandy?"

If there was one thing Alexandra Kathryn MacDonald couldn't resist, it was a challenge. Growing up in a family of twelve children, she thrived on it. And at twenty-one, she was still responding to her sixteen-year-old twin brothers with the same competitive spirit. Now she watched her brother James reset the stopwatch.

"I left the penknife on the outside edge of the tree house. You have to get it and bring it back in less than ninety-two seconds to beat my record," Randy instructed.

"Piece of cake," Sandy said. "Ready, boys?"

As they yelled "Go," like a monkey seeking coconuts, Sandy was scrambling up the tree.

"You'll never make it in time," came the chant from far below, and Sandy's laughter filtered down as she continued her climb.

The tree house was right above her.

Holding firmly to a branch, Sandy felt along the sturdy structure's edge, her fingers contacting Randy's penknife. Quickly she stuffed it into her pocket.

As she began her descent, her eyes caught movement on the winding clay road to the MacDonald farm. A cloud of red dust billowed behind Sandy's father's pickup truck. In its wake was a long sleek automobile.

Forgetting momentarily about the race, Sandy parted branches to get a better look. Visitors were not rare, fancy cars were.

"Thirty-nine seconds left!" came from below.

"Damn!" Woolgathering had cost her precious moments, but it was the touch of daredevil in her that caused her defeat.

With a small cry, Sandy felt herself slipping out of the tree, falling to the lowest branch, and finally hanging upside down by one leg, her long braids almost dragging the ground below. Randy's record was safe, but more embarrassing was the fact that a very dignified man some ten feet away was watching her attempts to swing upright and jump down from the tree.

Even from upside down, the man looked important. He was dressed impeccably in a dark three-piece suit that fit his tall, wide-shouldered body to perfection. His hair was dark, too, with silver sprinkled at the temples. But the man's face was young with only the pleasant lines of a male in his early thirties.

"Sandy! Get out of that tree!" Ray-

mond MacDonald's voice rang clear. "Are you trying to shame me, Alexandra?"

"Of course not, Daddy." Sandy brushed off the seat of her jeans, flashing her father a wide grin. Her eyes, the rich deep green of the ocean, were innocent as she stared up at him through long, sable lashes.

As always, Raymond MacDonald was incapable of staying angry. A stern man with a face burned brown by the Georgia sun, he was putty in the hands of any of his five beautiful daughters. "Come here and meet Mr. Hamilton," he said gruffly, gesturing to the man beside him.

Sandy turned slightly and studied the stranger. His eyes were blue. Piercing, soul-examining blue. She smiled hesitantly, extending a grimy hand. "How do you do," she said politely.

"A pleasure to meet you." The Southern accent was soft and cultured; the voice deep and musical.

"Come on inside, Tyler." Mr. MacDonald climbed the porch steps, skirting the kitchen entrance to opt for the formality of the living room.

Tyler Hamilton. Sandy watched him disappear into the house. One of the most prominent lawyers north of Atlanta. The head of one of the law offices where Sandy had intended to apply for a job.

Tyler Hamilton lived in the town of Cameron. He'd won several controversial cases in recent years, and since then his fame had spread. But even before that, he had been well-known. Because he'd been born into a wealthy family with roots deep in Georgia clay, his name had been bandied about for years as a potential political candidate.

Never one to be impressed by status, Sandy was still well aware of the top

quality of the Hamilton and Stone firm. In her four years on scholarship at a local girls' college, she had researched every important law office north of Atlanta. Sandy wanted to attend law school and become a public defender. She had taken every available course to prepare herself for a job as a paralegal in one of the state's better law firms.

She tiptoed through the hallway toward the stairwell, plotting how to get past the living room unnoticed. The men's voices stopped her cold.

"Is Alexandra the paralegal, Raymond?"

Sandy recognized Tyler Hamilton's deep voice.

"Yes, though you sure couldn't tell today."

"She's a pretty girl, but she doesn't look old enough to be in high school."

"Doesn't act old enough, either," came her father's scathing reply.

Resisting her impulse to stick her tongue out at both men, Sandy stood immobile in the hallway until the conversation changed. She darted past the living-room door, braids flying out behind her.

"Alexandra?"

One foot on the stairs, she stopped, surprised by Tyler Hamilton's summons. "Yes?"

"Would you mind joining us for a moment?"

Yes, she would mind, but no, she wasn't rude enough to refuse a guest in her home. She muttered, "I'm coming," and strolled into the room.

"Your father tells me you've had some legal training. I thought you should know why I'm here." Tyler Hamilton stood with old-fashioned courtesy when she entered. The only vacant chair was across the room, so Sandy

dropped onto the sofa next to the lawyer, wishing her jeans were cleaner.

"Mr. Hamilton's here because Chester Barkley up the road called him about a chemical dump bordering his property. Chester thinks the chemicals are leaking, and he wants Mr. Hamilton, here, to sue the Lanier Chemical Company."

"Is he talking about that vacant stretch of ground on the northeast corner of the farm, over by our livestock pond?" Sandy asked.

Mr. MacDonald nodded.

Sandy frowned. "Daddy, have you noticed any problems with the cattle or with Jennifer's pony?" Turning to Tyler, she explained, "They're the only animals we water at the pond."

"Nothing as far as I can see."

"I think we should check them carefully, but if the chemicals have been leaking for some time, the effects are probably subtle and long-range. Don't you think, Mr. Hamilton?"

Tyler Hamilton was watching her, a half smile twisting his mouth. "Exactly. My guess is that you'd have noticed something by now. At this point, we know nothing about what kinds of chemicals were stored there, whether they're leaking, or whether they're dangerous if they do. That will be my job to find out."

"That sounds like a lot of research," Sandy said. "Has Chester Barkley complained of anything specific, Mr. Hamilton?"

"Call me Tyler. As a matter of fact, his only evidence is some concrete canisters the rain exposed a month or so ago with Lanier Chemical on them. Chester called the company and they refused to talk to him, so he hired me."

"There are plenty of good lawyers in Gainesville," Mr. MacDonald said.

"How come he called someone from Cameron?"

Tyler said, "Well, he heard about some similar cases I've taken. He wanted someone with experience." Stretching his long legs in front of him, Tyler smiled brilliantly. "I guess I'm just that good," he drawled.

Raymond MacDonald laughed at Tyler's arrogance, the small joke bridging the gap between the two men. Sandy knew this was a sample of Tyler's courtroom style. No jury on earth could deny his charm.

"I'd like to help," she said. "I mean, you're going to need researchers, and until I start working full-time I've got time to spare."

"I'd like to have your help," he said.

"Why don't you drive over to Cameron next Monday and see my office. We can talk then." He drew out a business card.

"I'll be there," she told him.

Tyler rose, extending his hand to Mr. MacDonald. "Thank you for talking with me, Raymond. I'll be sure to keep in touch with you." Sandy watched her father walk him to the door. "Goodbye, Alexandra. I'll look forward to seeing you next week."

When Mr. MacDonald turned to face his daughter, she said, "Just why do you think a man like Tyler Hamilton would want to get involved in a lawsuit like this?"

"I don't know, but I'm going to keep both eyes open," Mr. MacDonald observed quietly.

"I liked him, Daddy. He has style and quiet conviction. I'll bet he's doing it because he believes in it."

"Whoa, girl," he warned. "Tyler Hamilton is trouble where you're concerned."

Sandy grinned as she stood on tiptoe

to peck his cheek. "You think every male is trouble where I'm concerned."

Mr. MacDonald shook his head. "There are Georgia folks and Georgia folks, honey. Folks like us are the ones that have made her grow and prosper. But it's folks like Tyler Hamilton who have done the prospering. Those folks stick together, Sandy. Don't ever forget it." Shaking his head again, Mr. MacDonald disappeared into the kitchen.

Shutting her eyes for a minute, Sandy pictured Tyler Hamilton. The man was masculine grace, charisma and elegant charm wrapped up in a six-foot-two package, with the most arresting blue eyes she had ever seen.

Somehow, without knowing why, Sandy was sure that her father's warning was already too late.

THE TOWN of Cameron was almost a two-hour drive to the southeast of Sandy's home. On Monday morning she parked her six-year-old Mustang on Main Street, directly in front of the Hamilton and Stone law firm.

Stepping out of the car, Sandy paused to straighten the gold cotton sweater and matching skirt she had chosen for her meeting.

Tyler's office was in a rose-colored brick building that had once been a private residence. Pausing on the porch, Sandy took a deep breath before opening the door to the reception area.

"May I help you?"

Sandy admired the shoulder-length curly hair of the young black woman at the desk. "My name is Sandy MacDonald. I'm here to see Mr. Hamilton."

"Mr. Hamilton has someone with him right now. My name is Dorothy

Carlin." She smiled. "I'll be glad to show you around if you'd like."

Ten minutes later the two women were chatting like old friends. Sandy had seen all the offices except Tyler's. Matthew Stone, his partner, was out of town, but Sandy had met Mrs. Howell, a sixtyish woman who ran the office.

"What an interesting place," Sandy told Dorothy. "I'll bet there's always something going..."

They were passing Tyler's office door, which was now ajar. Sandy lifted her eyes and found the elegant Georgian staring at her. He must have stopped in the middle of a sentence, too, because the man with him was asking, "What was that you said?"

For a moment neither Tyler nor Sandy moved, but her heart gave an uncharacteristic lurch. She smiled shyly and Tyler gave her a nodding salute before he turned back to his client. Passing on, she wondered why she felt so light-headed.

Minutes later Tyler stood patiently in front of her.

"How long have you been there?" she asked.

"Long enough to wonder if you were the same young woman who hung by one leg out of a magnolia tree last week."

Sandy stood. "I'm sorry, Mr. Hamilton, but you must have me confused with someone else. I just glide with ladylike grace over the veranda and drink tea with my pinkie crooked."

"I think I'll miss the tree climber." He smiled, taking Sandy's arm to guide her into his office. "But veranda gliders have their place."

"How about law researchers?" she suggested.

"Have a seat, Alexandra." Suddenly Tyler was all business.

"Please call me Sandy," she said as he sat across from her. She had expected something more casual, and suddenly she felt as though she was at a job interview.

Tyler was leaning back in his chair, tapping a gold fountain pen on his leg, and examining her. When he asked her why she had volunteered her services, she thought about his question awhile before answering. "I've always wanted to be a lawyer. I could have gone right to law school, but I felt that I needed some practical experience."

"Why was that?"

"It seemed to me that a good lawyer is someone who knows her way around a little bit. If I had some experience, I'd know what to study and the reasons why. And to be honest, I also needed a break from school. I was on full scholarship all four years, and I had to maintain a high grade point average. Law school didn't sound like much of a rest."

"What was your GPA?"

Sandy wasn't comfortable with bragging about herself. She could feel her creamy skin tinting. "I graduated with a 3.9."

Tyler whistled softly. "Very good."

"I was happy with it," she said.

"Did all that work leave you with time for a social life?"

Although the question seemed impertinent, Sandy realized that it was relevant. "No," she admitted. "I lived at home while I went to school, so I helped out on the farm. Between that and studying, I was probably the most reclusive college student in history."

"Is that another reason for delaying law school?"

Sandy nodded. "When I come home from work, I'll have a life of my own.

If I were in school, I'd come home and study."

"Is there a special man in your life?"

This time, Sandy couldn't think of a reason for the personal question: "Would it matter? If there were, it wouldn't interfere with my research for you."

"Humor me."

"No. There's no one."

"Tell me about school. What you liked and why."

Wondering why Tyler was taking so much time to interview a volunteer, Sandy gave him the information he sought.

"Dr. Hendrickson is a friend of mine," Tyler said, referring to the professor Sandy had said she admired most.

"Would you mind if I called her?"

"No, of course not," she answered.

"But Mr. Hamilton—"

"Tyler."

Sandy smiled. "Tyler, are you always this conscientious with volunteers? I can't even promise to help for very long. I'll need a job by summer."

"I'm offering you a job as my paralegal. If your references check out, that is."

Stunned, Sandy searched his face for the punch line. "Why on earth would you want to hire me?"

Tyler's piercing blue eyes were unguarded, and Sandy gulped a little at the devastating warmth of his smile. "Anyone who can climb up and down a sixty-foot magnolia tree in ninety-five seconds is the kind of person who can get things done," he answered finally.

"Thank you." Basking in the radiance of Tyler's smile, Sandy could hardly believe her good fortune.

"Since the references are just a formality, let's brainstorm about possible

living arrangements for you," Tyler said.

"I hadn't even thought of that."

"There's a new apartment building for singles that opened several months ago. There may still be a vacancy."

Sandy shook her head, trying to hide a smile. "Can you imagine my father allowing me to set foot inside one of those apartments?"

"You're twenty-one."

"Tyler, my parents are staunchly old-fashioned. We're very close. They only want the best for me. A happy marriage, kids, a career if I want one." She began to be uncomfortable with his direct gaze. "My folks have very traditional values."

"I gather you've inherited them."

"I guess I have."

"You should wear a warning sign, then. You're going to frustrate an awful lot of young men."

Sandy guessed that she had just been complimented, but before she could reply, Tyler was standing, and she stood, too.

"Would you like a walking tour of downtown Cameron?"

"I'd like that."

For the next hour they strolled through the streets, with Tyler pointing out places of interest and Sandy filing away the information.

At the last house on one short block, Tyler stopped. "How would you like to live here?"

She examined the stately old home. It was huge and white, like most of the houses on the street, with square pillars at regular intervals around the wrap-around porch and leaded glass panes in every window. Its neat yard was planted with azaleas and camellias, but what made the house unique was the row of

rabbit hutches on the front of the porch. "What do you mean?"

"My aunt Charlotte lives here by herself. She's quite a character, but somehow I think you'll like her. She's still going strong, and she'd like company and perhaps some help with her animals. At last count she had four cats, the rabbits—" he indicated the hutches "—a blind cocker spaniel, six parakeets and a boa constrictor, Julius Squeezer."

"And mice to feed Julius."

"Of course."

"I'd love to meet her."

"There are no trees suitable to climb," Tyler said.

"I'll swing sedately from the chandeliers."

Aunt Charlotte was a silver-haired eccentric with Tyler's blue eyes and a cane that she swung back and forth to accent every syllable she spoke.

Although the house was filled with pets, it was immaculate. Originally built for a large family with live-in servants, it was big enough to get lost in. By the time they progressed to the second floor, Aunt Charlotte had offered Sandy a room.

"Will this one do?" She flung open the door of a room that was almost as big as the entire upstairs of the MacDonald farmhouse. Blue-and-white flowered wallpaper covered the walls, and the high ceilings were painted blue to match. There were floor-to-ceiling windows onto a small balcony, and a charming view of Cameron.

"I love it."

"It's yours."

*

"DO YOU REALLY think you'll need five pairs of blue jeans in Cameron?" Wendy said.

"What else will I fill my suitcases with?" Sandy answered sensibly. The phone call from Tyler Hamilton had come and she was to start work immediately.

"Take some of my clothes. I have more than enough for both of us." Wendy began to pull perfectly coordinated skirts and blouses out of the closet.

"Don't be silly. I'm not taking your things."

Wendy ignored her sister, folding three outfits and neatly packing them. "All those hours I was learning to sew, you were out hoeing corn with the boys. Think of this as your reward."

There was a noisy toot followed by more in the yard below. "Stacey! Ryan!" she shouted and ran outside to greet her sister and her family.

LATER, after the sisters had helped their mother serve endless glasses of iced tea and pecan pie, Stacey caught her eye. "Sandy?"

Sandy smiled. "I'm going upstairs to finish packing," she told her. "Can you come up for a few minutes?"

Although they were only three years apart, their relationship had always held overtones of mother to child. As the oldest girl, Stacey had been second mother to all the younger children.

"Coming home is so strange," she mused. "Nothing has changed, and yet I feel like I'm in a time warp."

"Please, I'm having enough problems

with leaving," Sandy pleaded. "Tell me it's going to be okay."

"More than okay. And home will always be here for you."

"Did you feel this way when you left?"

Stacey shook her head. "Not when I left home, but when I got married. I was scared to death."

"Well, I've never seen you look so happy," Sandy said. "Tell me your secret."

"I'm pregnant."

Sandy was stunned. "I'm so happy for you."

The two sisters hugged.

"Do you know how lucky you are?" Sandy asked, pushing away to search Stacey's face.

"Yes." They smiled into each other's eyes for a long moment. "Sandy," Stacey added finally, "someday you're going to meet and marry the right man, too."

Sandy wondered why Tyler Hamilton's picture filled her mind. "I want a career," she said.

"You can have both," Stacey pointed out, reading Sandy's face like an open book. "Who's the man?"

Sandy shook her head, but she couldn't miss the opportunity to ask for advice. "Stacey, do you ever worry about the age difference between yourself and Ryan?"

"Never." Stacey waited. "Who's the man, Sandy?"

"My new boss," Sandy answered. "He's very attractive, but..."

Stacey's smile stopped her cold. "Tyler Hamilton is a terribly attractive man and you're a beautiful woman. But I'd say the age difference is the least of your problems, honey. The differences in your experience and life-style are much

more important. Tyler's only in his early thirties, after all."

"Tell me how you know all this."

Stacey said, "When I was Miss Gainesville, I had to go to countless parties. Tyler's mother was at a lot of them because she was active in the Cameron beauty pageant. She introduced me to Tyler and his wife, Kay, once. They were such a striking couple that I've never forgotten."

"At the time, I didn't know that Kay was dying. She was tall and blond, very poised. I remember that Tyler hovered over her and, of course, later I understood why. But they both seemed to be cut from the same cloth. Old Georgia warp and woof. Dignified, refined, with flawless manners and just the right amount of warmth."

"You're warning me, aren't you?" Sandy asked.

"No. I'm telling you what I know. And you're probably just what Tyler Hamilton needs," Stacey said. "But be careful, honey. You're going to be so easy for some man to hurt."

"Not me. I'm going to be a hard-as-nails attorney with a facade no one can crack with an ice pick."

Stacey examined the innocent gamine face and sparkling green eyes. "Ah, but it's not the ice picks I'm worried about, honey," she answered. "It's the kisses that are going to get to you. It's always going to be the kisses."

ON SATURDAY afternoon, with her Mustang packed to the limit, Sandy pulled up in front of the Southern colonial house that was to become her home. "Hello, Aunt Charlotte," Sandy greeted the old woman. "I hope Tyler told you that I was coming this afternoon."

Swinging her cane, Aunt Charlotte followed Sandy through the house. "Yes, he certainly did. Said he'd be here to help you unload if he could get away. He's got some sort of 'do' over at City Hall this afternoon."

The two women chatted.

"Welcome to Cameron, Sandy."

Sandy turned to see Tyler. She smiled shyly. "Thank you, Tyler."

"Every time I see you, this is different," he said, lifting an impossibly long strand of hair that Sandy had caught into a simple ponytail.

Tyler was wearing a dark blue suit with a conservative cranberry-colored tie and a crisp white shirt. He was even better-looking than she remembered. The blue suit emphasized his eyes and the silver strands just beginning to streak his thick dark hair.

"I noticed that your car still has a few books in it," Tyler told Sandy.

"Did I hear that you were here to help?" she murmured, wishing he had some fatal flaw she could dwell on.

Six boxes later, Tyler took off his coat and tie, unbuttoned the top two buttons of his shirt and rolled up his shirt-sleeves. Even rumpled, he was gorgeous.

"Too informal?" he asked, watching Sandy's fleeting expression of awe.

"Come off it, Tyler," she said. "You must know there are women who would kill for a man who looks like you."

His answer was a heart-melting grin that threatened to wipe the teasing smile right off her face.

"Do you know what my only reservation about hiring you was?" he asked, dropping to the floor and stretching out comfortably beside Sandy.

"You were afraid I was too dainty for legal work."

"I was afraid that working beside you every day was going to test my self-control to the limits."

"I'll try not to make mistakes," she said meekly.

"Are you trying to misunderstand me?"

After falling prey to his grin, Sandy had managed to avoid meeting Tyler's eyes, but his remark forced a visual confrontation. The teasing was over, and the air between them vibrated with unformed energy. "Please be direct," she said softly.

"All right. I find you very attractive. Maintaining a strictly professional relationship is not going to be easy. But I decided that it was the very worst kind of sexism not to hire you just because you're young and beautiful and so full of life I can almost touch it."

"Why are you telling me this?" Sandy asked.

"Because I think you're attracted to me, too, and I wanted us to clear the air." Tyler put two fingers under her chin and tipped her head back so that she had to look at him. "I'm not going to take advantage of your feelings. You have nothing to worry about."

She wanted to protest that deep down inside she was worried he *wouldn't* take advantage of her, but wisely, she kept silent and nodded her head.

SIX WEEKS later, Sandy walked through the door of Hamilton and Stone, humming a song that she had just heard.

The all-business manner her favorite boss had treated her with at first had been replaced by an open warmth that Sandy found both confusing and intriguing. Never out of line, Tyler still found ways to communicate his interest, and

Sandy sometimes found it difficult to concentrate on her work.

She was completely infatuated with him and she knew it. She tried to tell herself that she was due for this, that the life she had led previously had delayed this passionate reaction to a man, and that it would soon pass. When it didn't, she told herself that she had chosen Tyler because he was perfectly safe. But when she caught him looking at her with unabashed desire in his eyes one morning, she knew that another theory had been destroyed.

How had this come about? Sandy had met several eligible young men through her work and her attendance at the local Baptist church. She had dated one of them, who was fun to be with, but when he asked her out again, she refused. When another young man asked her to a church social, Sandy had turned him down flat. She was so caught up with Tyler Hamilton that dating other men seemed ridiculous.

On this morning, with the popular love song resounding through her head, Sandy ran up against her problem immediately.

"Sandy, will you come into my office, please?"

With a smile for Dorothy and Mrs. Howell, Sandy trotted down the hall after Tyler. "I'm going to Atlanta this weekend," he told her after some pleasant small talk. "I want you to come with me."

There it was. The summons she had both dreaded and longed for. Sandy gulped. "I don't think that would be a good idea," she said.

Tyler laughed. "Whoa, Miss MacDonald. I'm not making any illicit offers. Mrs. Howell will be coming, too. I finally got an appointment with the pres-

ident of Lanier Chemical for Friday afternoon. I want you there to see how these things are done. You've done most of the work. You deserve to be there for the kill."

"Since there will be a chaperon," she said formally, "of course I'll come."

ATLANTA WAS bustling with chaotic energy. Sitting in the back seat of Tyler's luxurious Lincoln, Sandy peered out the window.

They had traveled for most of the morning with minimal conversation. When he pulled up to a sky-scraping luxury hotel near the center of the city, she was grateful to get out and stretch her legs.

Their rooms adjoined, Mrs. Howell and Sandy in one, Tyler in the other. For their meeting at Lanier Chemical, Sandy changed into the only conservative suit she owned. When she was ready to go, she knocked at Tyler's door.

He let her in, buttoning a clean shirt with one hand as he held the door. Sandy glimpsed more of Tyler's hard, sleek body than she felt entitled to see, and when she averted her eyes to his face, he was grinning. "I gather you're not used to half-naked men in hotel rooms."

"I grew up with half-naked men," she quipped. "Nothing is sacred in a big family."

"But we aren't related," he reminded her, "and that makes it different."

It was different, all right. "Maybe I'd better wait downstairs while you finish dressing," she suggested.

Tyler inclined his head toward the bed. "Sit."

She did so, perching on the edge like a sparrow ready to take flight. Tyler had

turned to the mirror to knot a navy blue tie.

"I'm beginning to understand why your father is so protective of you," Tyler said.

"I told you, my family's old-fashioned."

"I'll bet it's more than that." Tyler turned, a half smile on his face. "I imagine your father realizes that as innocent as you are, you're a sitting duck."

"There was a time in history when innocence was valued," Sandy said primly.

"A tomboy in Victorian wrappings."

"Don't make fun of me."

"I'm sorry, but you look like you'd spring off that bed if I even moved in your direction."

Sandy blushed, leaning back. "Better?"

Tyler just smiled.

"I could take off my jacket, unpin my hair and smile seductively," she added, "but it would take so long, we'd be late for our appointment."

"If you did any of those things, we wouldn't even make the appointment."

Sandy sat up straight. "We'd better go."

"We'd better," Tyler agreed.

After weeks of hard work the appointment with Lanier Chemical's president, Melvin Howard, was a huge letdown.

The two men argued civilly about who should oversee the cleanup and who should test for possible pollution. Mr. Howard explained that the company had been running studies all month, a fact that Sandy knew to be true. They would be glad, however, to pay an independent lab to duplicate their research.

The entire meeting took twenty-four minutes. With handshakes all around,

Sandy and Tyler were soon outside the building.

"Let's celebrate tonight. Let me take you to dinner."

"Mrs. Howell, too?"

"Mrs. Howell, too," he said with a harsh sigh.

"Afterward," she said, "would you show me a little of the city?"

"Mrs. Howell, too?"

"Not necessarily," Sandy murmured.

Tyler brushed his hand over her hair, tucking a stray wisp behind her ear. "It's a date," he said.

Sandy snuggled back into the seat cushions and shut her eyes.

MRS. HOWELL REFUSED to go anywhere. Tyler had several appointments the next morning, and his secretary planned to go to bed at eight o'clock sharp in order to be ready to go with him.

The only dress Sandy had brought to Atlanta was a conservative shirtwaist.

"You are not wearing that," Mrs. Howell told Sandy. "What else did you bring?"

"Blue jeans?"

With an exasperated shake of her head, Mrs. Howell ordered Sandy to follow her downstairs.

On the ground floor of the hotel there was a variety of shops. The boutique that Mrs. Howell steered Sandy into was the kind where she didn't even window-shop, but soon she was in the dressing room with three outrageously priced dresses. In the end, the choice was simple. The sea green crepe with tightly fitting bodice and flaring skirt that emphasized her slender waist and long legs was stunning.

"Don't you think the neckline of this

dress is too low?" she asked Mrs. Howell.

"No."

"Maybe I should take a sweater."

"No."

TYLER WAS right on time, dressed elegantly in dark blue slacks and a dinner jacket that accented his tall, broad-shouldered body. He stared at Sandy while murmuring polite regrets that Mrs. Howell wouldn't be joining them.

The walk to the hotel garage had a calming effect. By the time Sandy was settled next to Tyler, she was beginning to feel almost normal.

"Where are we going?"

"We're having dinner at a nearby hotel." Tyler put his arm on the back of the seat as he turned to pull out, and his fingers brushed Sandy's hair. With his foot on the brake, he let his fingertips tunnel through the golden mass to find her neck and caress it lightly. The sensation was like a thousand butterflies dancing down her spine. "I wish I'd known that Mrs. Howell wasn't coming," Tyler said. "I would have chosen someplace more intimate."

"Is it too late?"

"My parents are in town, and I invited them to dinner with us at their hotel. I had no idea that you and I had a chance to be alone. I'm sorry."

"Don't be, Tyler. It will be fun."

But it wasn't. Mr. and Mrs. Hamilton obviously doted on their only son but disapproved of his choice of a dinner companion. Tyler's mother seemed especially concerned. By the end of the meeting, the silver-haired matriarch had made two comments about Sandy's youth and one condescending remark about her rural background.

Mr. Hamilton warmed up considerably as the meal progressed, caught in the snare of Sandy's innocent charm.

Even though she was under examination, Sandy was sensitive to the other undercurrents swirling through the conversation. Georgia politics were discussed with fervor. The Hamiltons, especially Tyler's mother, wanted their son to run for the legislature in the next election. Tyler did not want to discuss it.

"I'm sorry I had to put you through that," Tyler and Sandy had said restrained goodbyes to his parents and were seated once again in the Lincoln.

"Is it always like that?" she asked.

"It's not usually that bad. They're getting older, though, and they're desperate to see me settled in the life they think is right for me." She put her hand on his arm in comfort.

"You look beat. Why don't we skip the sight-seeing?"

Instead of the nod she had expected, Tyler put his arm around Sandy's shoulders and pulled her close. "I want to be with you tonight."

The kiss, when it came, was gentle and reassuring. Tyler moved his lips over hers with an aching sweetness that threatened to dissolve every bone in her body. His hands tangled in her hair and his tongue began to caress her lips. Just at the point where Sandy moaned and opened her mouth to receive him, he drew back. "In all my fantasies," he said softly, "I never imagined that kissing you would be this sweet."

The kiss had been wonderful. Hearing that Tyler had fantasies about her was wonderful, too. "Thank you," she murmured, pressing her body softly against his. Tentatively she placed a hand

against his chest. Through the fabric she could feel his heart pounding.

"I know a place we can go and you can see as much of Atlanta as you want without even leaving the room," Tyler said, covering Sandy's hand with his.

For a moment, she thought he meant his hotel room, and she went rigid with shock. "Tyler, Mrs. Howell would be right next door," she whispered.

Tyler's laughter filled the car. "You're way ahead of me, Sandy. Let's take this one step at a time."

The place Tyler had in mind was a private club at the very top of an office building near Lanier Chemical. The glass walls surrounding them did nothing to impede the view of the Atlanta skyline.

"Tyler!"

He turned as they neared the door to the terrace to see three men bearing down on them.

"I'm sorry, Sandy," he apologized.

The three men were Atlanta attorneys visiting the club with their wives, and the scent of Georgia politics wafted through the air. "Come on over and sit with us," one of them demanded. "We've been trying to get hold of you for weeks now."

"No, not tonight," Tyler told them, after he had introduced Sandy. "If you were here with Miss MacDonald, would you let yourselves be persuaded to join anyone else?"

Good-natured backslapping followed and a sly wink at Sandy's blushing face. In a moment Tyler was steering her onto the terrace.

He pointed out some of Atlanta's landmarks, stopping only when he noticed that Sandy was watching him instead. "Come with me," he said quietly.

Holding hands, they strolled to one

side of the building that had been designed for privacy, with tall shrubbery in clay pots screening visitors from view. They were absolutely alone.

"Dance with me," Tyler requested, putting his arms around her. They stood together, swaying to the music of the small orchestra inside. Sandy was so intrigued by the feel of Tyler's body against her own that she hardly noticed when he stopped dancing.

She stepped back just far enough to read his expression. "Everything has changed, hasn't it?" she asked.

"Yes." When his mouth found hers, she was ready. Her hesitation was gone, her body so flooded with rippling desire that she couldn't get close enough, couldn't share enough. This kiss wasn't sweet. It was pure passion. Tyler's hands explored the slender lines of her sides and back, his tongue explored her mouth. The kiss became another and then another until Sandy stopped counting.

When her tongue answered his, beginning its own exploration, Tyler groaned in response. Accepting her honeyed warmth, he cupped her bottom in his hands to move her slowly up and down against his hardening body.

Still innocent of signals, Sandy tangled her fingers in Tyler's hair and allowed him to deepen their intimacy. "Tyler," she whispered, her own mouth slanting over his to claim it in a kiss that kept nothing from him.

But when her tongue sought his this time, he pulled back, holding her away from his body. "Sandy, don't do that," he said.

"There you are." The three attorneys, trailed by their attractive wives, appeared from around the corner of the ter-

race, and Tyler pulled Sandy to stand beside him.

"I'll get us out of here," Tyler promised quietly, and after a minimum of polite conversation, he did.

Inside their hotel, he said, "We have to talk." He chose a quiet corner in the hotel bar to give them anonymity.

The waitress took their order, and Tyler waited until their drinks arrived before he began. "I'm not sorry I kissed you," he said, taking Sandy's hand in his. "But that kiss was the beginning of something that can't be allowed to happen between us."

Sandy might be innocent, but she wasn't ignorant. She lifted her eyes to his, but before she could speak, he continued. "I could never insult your father by taking advantage of your youth and your sweetness, Sandy. If you had an affair with me, Raymond would never forgive either of us."

Shock waves crashed through Sandy's body at his words. She was furious at his arrogance. "Are you so used to women clamoring to jump into your bed that you think that's what I'm trying to do?"

"The thought entered my mind."

"You conceited chauvinist." She was too angry to be careful. "I'm going to share a name with the man I love before I share his bed. And right now I'm still Alexandra Kathryn MacDonald."

"Let me give you some advice, then. Don't kiss a man like you kissed me if you're not extending an invitation." Tyler held her hands tightly. Sandy tried to pull free, but he wouldn't let her go. "Men don't like to be teased," he added. "Someone else might have taken you up on your offer. Remember it."

"Have you been so hurt by the trag-

edy in your life that you can't recognize honest emotion anymore?" she asked.

"Just what does that mean?"

I'm in love with Tyler Hamilton, she realized as he continued to hold her prisoner. I'm twenty-one with my whole life ahead of me, and I've fallen hopelessly, terribly in love. I am the worst kind of fool.

There seemed to be no way to salvage the remnants of a relationship. Tyler was waiting for an answer. "Please let go of me," she pleaded softly, her eyes on his hands.

"Look at me."

She shook her head, but she lifted her eyes anyway. Dreading what she would see in Tyler's face, she tried to erase the expression from her own, and failed.

"You think you're in love with me," Tyler said, his voice tinged with amazement.

"Please, let go of me."

He did, but his hands still lay on hers, and she hadn't enough strength or pride to leave him yet. "Sandy," he said, "don't fall in love with me. I can't love you back. I don't want to marry again."

For just a moment all the devastation of loss was written across Tyler's face in bitter lines. "I'm sorry you've been hurt, Tyler. I can understand that you'd never want to face that much pain again," she said, turning her palms up to grasp his hands.

Her understanding seemed to be the last thing he wanted. He removed his hands from hers, and said in an emotionless voice, "You'll be over this in no time. You're very young."

It was a slap in the face, but it gave Sandy the courage to leave him. She stood. "Even at my tender age, Tyler, I know what love is. I'm not going to embarrass you with my feelings. I'll just

need a reference so that I can look for another job."

*

ALTHOUGH SANDY had called Aunt Charlotte two weeks ago to let her know that she would be moving her things out of the house, she had put off the trip to Cameron. But Wendy agreed to go with her to help pack and move.

"You're as peaked-looking as one of Julius's mice," Aunt Charlotte said.

"And you're still as frisky as a kitten," Sandy observed with sad affection. "I'm sorry if my leaving has caused you any problems."

"I'm not the one with the problems," Aunt Charlotte snorted. "That nephew of mine's the one who's upset. But I'm disappointed in both of you."

Sandy was taken aback. "Why?"

"I was counting on you to pull that boy out of his shell. I didn't expect either of you to behave this way."

Sandy's face was suffused with color. "I don't..."

"You do, too. I never saw two people who needed each other more, but both of you are as hardheaded as rhinoceroses." The old woman shook her head.

"I think I'd better pack and get out of here fast," Sandy told Wendy.

"Yes. If you don't move fast, you might actually have to think about what she said," Wendy agreed.

Halfway through the fourth box of books, there was a knock on Sandy's door. "Will you get it?" She heard the door open and footsteps. A prickling sensation at the back of her neck warned her that her visitor wasn't Aunt Charlotte and that Wendy had discreetly left the room. Sandy continued to pack books, her back to the door.

"I don't suppose I could persuade you to stay."

It wasn't fair, she thought with a surge of panic. It had been two weeks since she had heard Tyler's voice, and still, one sentence could turn her inside out.

She felt rather than heard him come up behind her but she still jumped when he knelt and put his hands on her shoulders. "I never meant to hurt you," he said.

"I know."

"I don't want you to go. We could pretend that nothing ever happened."

"I can't lie to myself, Tyler. I never learned how. It would be awkward for us both if I stayed," Sandy said finally.

"I would try very hard not to make it awkward."

"And when I saw you with other women and knew... I'm not sophisticated enough to handle that."

"Sandy, there is no special woman in my life. There hasn't been since Kay died."

She shut her eyes briefly at the revelation. "Tyler, if there was no one to stand in my way, and you continued to look at me like that, I think I'd end up in your bed. And that would destroy me."

Tyler was silent, his hands still resting on her shoulders. When she opened her eyes, she found that he was studying her face. Wide-eyed, she watched as he bent slowly to take her mouth.

The kiss was clearly a goodbye, a tender farewell to emotions that neither of them could have controlled or predicted. But the kiss was unpredictable, too. Abandoning herself, Sandy leaned forward and put her slender fingers on the back of his neck. Her caress, as gentle and undemanding as it was, seemed

to send desire sweeping through Tyler's body.

He arched against her, his arms wrapping around her back to pull her close.

Sandy knew she was moaning. The kiss went on and on and she was dizzied by it, but when Tyler finally broke away, the absence of his mouth was even more dizzying. "Tyler?"

"Damn!"

She sat back in confusion as she saw the 'savage' anger in his eyes. The slam of the bedroom door announced the new beginning of her loneliness.

SINCE THE disastrous trip to Cameron, she had thrown herself into family life and the local social scene with an energy that, even for her, was unusual. But it hadn't even begun to touch the empty place inside her.

"Sandy," her father said, "Tyler Hamilton called me today. He's driving down tomorrow to meet with all the local farmers. He has the final laboratory reports."

"Good news, I hope?" she asked.

"It seems so. He asked that you be present, since you did so much of the work. The meeting's at 10:00 a.m. at Chester Barkley's house."

"I won't be there."

For once, the MacDonald supper table was quiet. Although Sandy had shared her story only with Wendy, she knew that her parents suspected the truth.

"Ma, Randy ate all the peaches." Jennifer's wail broke the long silence. As if Sandy had never spoken, the family rallied around, quickly returning to normal.

AT TEN OF TEN next morning, Sandy watched her father's truck pull out of the

drive. At ten-thirty, heartsick and too tired to pretend anymore, she sought the comfort of the magnolia tree.

It was past eleven when Sandy fell asleep.

She awakened a little later to the rustling of tree branches. Slowly opening her eyes, Sandy heard the sound of someone climbing the tree. It was too labored to be Randy or James. When Tyler swung himself into the tree house she greeted him with a polite, "How nice to see you."

"I've missed you," he said with no preliminaries, stretching out to lie beside her.

"Have you?" she asked, giving up the pretense of politeness. Her eyes were wide, vulnerable and fully awake. *Please don't hurt me again*, they pleaded.

Pushing her onto her back, Tyler covered her mouth with his, but Sandy lay rigid beneath him, holding herself back.

"Don't punish me," he pleaded against her mouth.

She would not bend; she would not melt. But Tyler would not be denied. His arms circled her inert body, cradling her as he pulled her even farther beneath him. The feel of his hard body so fully against hers made her tremble with the desire for him that had never abated.

"Don't do this to me, Tyler. It isn't fair."

Moving to Sandy's side, Tyler started unfastening the buttons of her cotton shirt. He watched her eyes blink open as shock and desire left their mark on her expressive face.

"Tyler, I can't," she whispered in a broken voice. "Don't ask this of me. You know I can't."

He continued with the fourth button as if she hadn't spoken. "Yes, you

can." With her blouse open to his gaze he drank in the sight of her. She wasn't passive now, she was writhing beneath him, trying to escape. With his fingertips barely brushing the bared skin, Tyler felt every inch of her as she moaned in frustration. When his mouth descended to one breast, her startled gasp inflamed him and he pulled the sweet rosy nub into his mouth, stroking her with his tongue.

"Sweet heaven," she cried. "Don't do this, Tyler."

"This and more," he murmured roughly, "much, much more."

A voice drifted up from below. "Did you find her, Tyler?"

Sandy groaned softly at her father's question and at the incredible things Tyler was doing to her.

Tyler straightened, a half smile on his face, and called, "I certainly did."

"Then I'll expect to see you both down here in five minutes."

"Good idea," Tyler agreed.

"He means it, Tyler," she warned, trying to sit up, but Tyler's mouth covered hers, cutting off any further lectures.

Resistance gone, Sandy arched to meet him, her tongue finding his, her body melting into his body. With her arms wrapped tightly around his back, she held him against her.

When Tyler groaned and moved away from her, she understood why. And when she finally found the courage to search his eyes, she found humor there, and something else that took her breath away.

"What on earth did you tell my father?" she asked as she sat up slowly, pulling her blouse closed. "Did you tell him what you were planning to do to me up here?"

Tyler shot her a stunning grin. "I told him that I was going to ask you to marry me."

"Marry you?"

"Yes. And whatever you think, I wasn't planning to have the honeymoon before the wedding. That's what your father is trying to prevent, by the way."

Sandy shoved his wandering hand away from the cleavage of her unbuttoned blouse, her cheeks the color of a ripe peach. "But why do you want to marry me?"

Tyler sighed and pulled her close, carefully tugging the fabric of her blouse from her fingers. Slowly, he began to button it. "I need you."

Need she could understand. But it wasn't enough.

"I see."

"No, you don't." He pulled her to sit on his lap like a child. "You make me feel alive like no one else ever has, Sandy. You bring me joy."

"I thought I brought you anger."

"How can I ask for your forgiveness? I didn't want to feel again. I was fighting what you had to offer me."

She shook her head. "I never thought this far ahead. I wasn't trying to trap you, to tease. Marriage never entered my mind. I have law school ahead of me. What kind of a wife will I be for a man like you? I don't want to go off on the campaign trail. I've never even been to a country club. Your mother doesn't like me."

"I like you, and I'm the one you'll be marrying," he said. "I don't want to go off on the campaign trail, either. You will make a fabulous wife for a man like me, and you can commute to law school at the University of Georgia when you're ready."

Sandy knew that she couldn't say no.

Tyler could not tell her he loved her, but he had said she brought him joy. And she loved him. There were good marriages that were built on much less. She trembled as his hand began to stray beneath her blouse again.

"There are one thousand and one things I want to do to you," he said.

"Marry me right away so that I can spend my life making up for the time we don't have today."

With a sigh, she surrendered to his kisses, to his hands and to his promises.

With thirty seconds left to them, Sandy agreed to become Tyler's wife.

ST. DAVID'S CHURCH filled up quickly. Cameron's finest citizens sat on the side reserved for friends and relatives of the groom, Sandy's guests on the other side.

Now, dressed in the same wedding gown that Stacey had worn only a year before, Sandy began the long walk down the aisle on her father's arm. Her golden hair was loose and garlanded with tiny white rosebuds and ropes of pearls.

She murmured vows, exchanged rings and turned her face up to Tyler's for his kiss.

The country-club reception was as elaborate as their wedding ceremony had been. Although Sandy's parents had taken care of the wedding expenses, the Hamiltons had insisted on doing the reception.

They had hired a small orchestra, and after Sandy and Tyler cut the largest wedding cake she had ever seen, he led her out for the first dance. It was the only time all day that they had been able to talk.

"I should have put a stop to this," Tyler said grimly as he pulled her close. "What a nightmare."

Sandy hugged him close. "I thought this was what you wanted."

"I thought *you* wanted it. I didn't realize until today how intimidating all this must be for you."

Lips covered hers in a not-formal-at-all kiss. "I think I'm going to make it," she reassured him.

"I don't know how people survive long engagements," Sandy whispered in Tyler's ear as the song ended and everyone applauded.

Although Tyler had tried to consult Sandy about their honeymoon plans, she had preferred to be surprised. After she had thrown the bouquet, and said good-bye to the immediate families, she found herself in the Lincoln, next to her new husband, speeding down the highway.

"Are you going to tell me where we're headed?" she asked. Wherever they were going, they couldn't get there fast enough to suit her.

"I'm taking you to my beach house in South Carolina."

Sandy let the words sink in. As hard as she had tried to push Tyler's first marriage out of her mind, today had made it difficult. Now they were going to honeymoon in a place where Tyler and Kay had spent time together. "How long have you had the beach house?"

"Seven or eight years. Why?"

"I'm being foolish," she said. "It's just that...well, I'm not really jealous of your first wife...." She felt Tyler stiffen beside her. "It's just that...when you make love to me tonight, I want to be sure you know who's in your bed."

"What an extraordinary thing to say," Tyler answered after a moment of silence.

"I know you loved her. I can live with that. But making love tonight in the

same bed where you made love to Kay? I don't think I can handle that."

"Kay was never at the beach house. She hated isolated places. It's always been my retreat, and no one's ever been there with me until now."

"I'm sorry," she said, quick tears forming in her green eyes.

"Sandy, you won't be sharing your marriage bed with another woman. Not in any way."

The beach house was gray, weathered wood built off the ground on tall posts. It sat, surrounded by dunes, just off the ocean shore. And it was absolutely deserted.

"I love it. I love it!" Sandy scurried over the dunes as Tyler climbed the steps to unlock the back door.

The sun had recently set, and pastel streaks of light hovered on the horizon. Sandy abandoned her new husband to the task of carrying suitcases as she ran along the water's edge.

"You look just right here," Tyler said from the shadows, and she turned to hold out her arms to him.

"This is home."

"Have you ever seen the ocean before?"

"Never. And now you may have to drag me away."

"Not for two whole weeks," he reminded her, catching her by the waist and twirling her in his arms.

Sandy slid down his long body as he cupped her buttocks, moving her against him. "Two whole weeks. What will we do all that time?" she asked.

"We'll think of something."

Tyler set her down gently and, with his arm around her waist, propelled her toward the house. "Are you hungry?"

They had stopped to eat on the way but Sandy had only picked at her food.

Now she was hungry for something different.

At the top of the steps, Tyler swung her off her feet again, carrying her over the threshold.

Inside, the house was irresistible. The entire front that faced the ocean was glass.

Tyler came to stand behind her, his arms around her waist. "I hired a woman to come in and open it up for us and to stock the refrigerator. If you like, she can come back and cook every day, too. Otherwise, she'll just be back every three days to clean."

"Over my dead body."

Tyler tightened his arms. "You're not supposed to work on your honeymoon."

"Taking care of you comes under the heading of pleasure."

"Oh, I think you'll be taking care of me quite nicely, Alexandra Kathryn MacDonald Hamilton. I'm counting on it."

Suddenly Tyler broke away to show her through the house. There were three bedrooms. At the last, Sandy self-consciously went to sit on the big double bed. "Is this our room?"

Tyler half smiled. "Bingo."

The room had floor-to-ceiling windows looking over a deck that led down to the beach. "I'm going to love it."

"I hope so."

An attack of shyness made her examine her shoe. Sensing her discomfort, Tyler said, "I'm going to make a fire in the living room. Change if you'd like to or come as you are."

Sandy settled on a floor-length green nightgown and robe that exactly matched her eyes. Stacey had given them to her. After a quick shower Sandy put them on, and the filmy material

slithered seductively around her hips and thighs.

"You're as beautiful as you were in your wedding dress." Tyler made room for her on the sofa beside him.

Together they watched the flames dance. "I'm so glad to be here," Sandy told him, turning her face up to his. Tyler's eyes were shut. "Tyler?"

"Sandy, I know you must be exhausted. I'll understand if you would just like to go to bed now."

She wasn't sure what he meant. "But you have to get ready, don't you?"

"I'm not going just yet."

"Then neither am I." She settled back beside him, but his words had left her ill at ease.

This was the long-awaited wedding night, and suddenly Tyler didn't seem to want her anymore.

"Aren't you going to kiss me?" she asked finally.

Something like a groan came from Tyler's side of the sofa. He complied, with his mouth moving against hers as if he were afraid that she would recoil at any pressure.

Deciding to take matters into her own hands, she put them on the back of his neck and pulled his mouth against hers again. Her tongue traced his lips as she pressed her soft breasts against his shirt.

Tyler's hand began to wander over the curves of her body. "Perhaps it's time for bed after all," he said.

He stood and disappeared down the hall, then into the bathroom. Sandy pulled down the sheets and slipped off her robe.

Sandy watched as he approached her. She wanted to soothe away whatever troubled him, but when she reached for him, he held her gently away. "It's cold in here. Get under the covers."

She was relieved when Tyler pulled her into the crook of his arm. She could feel the heat from his body through the thin fabric of her gown. The shiver that went through her had nothing to do with the chill in the air.

Snuggling closer, she caressed his cheek, the perfect outline of his mouth. "It seems that all my life, I've wanted to be here like this with you," she whispered.

But at her words he seemed to pull even farther into himself. "Under those tomboy ways exists a true romantic," he said, kissing her fingertips.

Slowly she began to unbutton the top of his pajamas, and felt a reassuring shudder pass through his long frame. Her inexperienced fingers began to play with the inky curls she had uncovered until he stopped her. "Sandy, if you do too much of that, tonight is going to be a disaster."

Humiliation drained through her. She had thought that touching him would bring him pleasure. Instead he seemed angry. She moved away a little. "I'm sorry," she said finally. "You'll have to tell me what to do, then."

"Let me take care of it," he said.

"Tyler, if you're too tired, I'll certainly understand."

His laugh was humorless. "I'd have to be dead to be too tired to make love to you."

But though he said he wanted her, Sandy could find no real evidence of it in the controlled, almost calculated way he began to caress her. It was as if Tyler had set out to make their union as passionless as possible.

His hands were gentle, but they held no magic. His kisses held no fire. He whispered words of affection, but no

words of love or arousal. He did not undress her.

Finally, with careful precision he made them one. And Sandy, who would have been the willing vessel of genuine passion no matter what the initial pain, lay back against the pillows and cried bitter, helpless tears.

*

WHY DID HE marry me? she asked herself, her eyes still tightly shut. She listened for the sound of Tyler's breathing. But he was gone. A muffled crash from the kitchen pinpointed his location.

Grabbing clothes at random from her suitcase, she went into the bathroom to prepare for the new day.

Tyler was sitting at a small round table by the glass walls that revealed the ocean. When he saw her, his expression was as veiled as her own. *We've been married less than twenty-four hours, and already we have secrets to hide*, she thought sadly.

"Good morning. I made coffee if you'd like some."

"Thank you." She went into the kitchen. "Have you eaten anything?"

"I was waiting for you."

It was a good sign. He remembered he had married her. Now, if she could just figure out why.

"Would you like eggs and bacon for breakfast?" she called. Strong arms around her waist stopped her.

"No. I'd like a good-morning kiss." He turned her slowly to face him. "Look at me."

She tilted her head to read his expression. Instead she was subjected to a friendly kiss. "Good morning, wife," he said.

"Good morning, husband," she an-

swered softly. "How do you like your eggs?"

There was little conversation over the breakfast table. Tyler complimented her on her cooking. They commiserated over the drizzling rain that was going to make it impossible to enjoy the beach.

Tyler made another fire, and they sat together watching it as they had the night before. Sandy asked him to tell her about some of his cases and surprisingly, the informal conversation relaxed them both. By noon, they were smiling and laughing.

After lunch, Tyler pulled out a book and Sandy went to take a nap. The strain of the morning had given her a headache and she fell asleep feeling sad. But she woke up angry. For some reason she couldn't fathom, she had been cheated out of the one thing she had been sure would be good in their marriage.

She was no longer humiliated. She no longer felt inadequate. She was simply ready to claw his eyes out.

"You're awake."

"Yes."

Tyler was standing at the door watching her. "The sun's coming out. I thought I'd take advantage of the last hours of daylight and walk on the beach."

"Be my guest."

"Sandy, I'm asking you to come with me."

There was amusement in his voice, and she swung her legs over the bed, standing up. "Then why didn't you say so?"

"I just did."

"Communicating with you is like talking to an out-of-order robot, Tyler. You rarely say what you mean. Someone's switched your microchips around."

He laughed, his long arms pulling her close as he did. "Do you always wake up from a nap like this?"

"Always. You're going to hate being married to me."

"Impossible. You're adorable when you're angry," he said.

"Then perhaps I should have worked up a temper tantrum last night," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"Forget it, Tyler. Let's take that walk."

The air was pleasantly warm as they walked along the shore. Sandy stuffed her hands in her pockets to avoid holding Tyler's, and they were both quiet, immersed in their own thoughts. They walked for miles, starting back to the beach house when the sun was no longer visible.

Filled with pent-up tension, Sandy sat on the sand and began to pull off her shoes.

The sky was darkening. The beach was totally deserted. Hidden by the dunes, Sandy began to pull off her blue jeans, then her T-shirt, standing in front of him in a silky violet teddy. She didn't notice Tyler's indrawn breath as his eyes fastened on her exposed body. She had turned to run into the waves when he called her to come back.

The water was ice against her skin, and she gasped as she dove into a wave, letting it cover her for a moment before she came up for a breath. She spit out the salt water and coughed, diving back in again.

Finally she was shivering so hard that she could not stay in a second longer. She was farther out than she had intended, but as she brushed long strands of hair from her eyes, she saw that between her and the beach was her hus-

band, wading angrily through the ocean to retrieve her. She lurched through the small waves to collapse in Tyler's arms. Scooping her up, he carried her to dry land.

"You little fool," he ground out. Setting her on her feet, he stripped the soaked teddy off. "Get dressed," he said, his voice strangled.

As cold and miserable as she was, Sandy did not miss the expression on Tyler's face or the sound of his words. Shivering, she watched his eyes hungrily devour her.

"No. I won't."

"You'll freeze!"

"Restore my warmth." Wantonly, she pressed her body to his, moving against him with all the concentrated desire she had ever known.

He was a drowning man. When he scooped her up this time it was to carry her to the shadow of the dunes. In a moment he was undressed, too, and they were in each other's arms, crying out for satisfaction.

Sandy clung to Tyler, her legs wrapped tightly around him. When he tried to roll off her a few moments later, she wouldn't let him. "Don't go," she whispered.

"We have to. You're going to get sick if I don't get you inside."

"I'm not cold."

"Humor me. Just this once."

When they entered the house he went straight to the bathroom, turning on the shower. Sandy, passing in the hallway, was snatched, undressed and set under the hot water before she could protest. When she emerged, Tyler was gone.

Wrapping a towel around her rosy flesh, she went in search of her husband. "Tyler?"

There was no answer. Curiosity

piqued, she dressed quickly, and then searched the house. Tyler was definitely gone. She discovered his discarded clothing in the tiny laundry room, no clues to his whereabouts.

Shrugging her shoulders at the mystery, she returned to their bedroom. She sat on the bed with the lights off, staring out at the ocean, remembering their lovemaking. It had been everything she had ever dreamed about and more.

Sometime later she heard the door slam. When he stood at the bedroom door, she didn't turn.

He came to sit beside her. "Are you warm enough?" he asked.

"Not without you here," she said.

"You weren't hurt?"

"Today was wonderful. *Last* night hurt because I thought you didn't want me."

"Didn't want you? I wanted you so much I thought I'd die. And I was so afraid I'd spoil things for you. When you cried I felt like the worst failure in the world."

"I felt like the failure. No matter what I did, you didn't like it."

"I liked it too much. I was afraid I'd lose control. You do that to me."

"I thought I was supposed to do that."

"Not on our wedding night. I didn't want anything that happened last night to have repercussions for our future together."

His explanation spoke volumes. Sandy understood instinctively that Tyler was referring to his past.

"Tyler, do you remember when we were driving here and you told me that I wouldn't be sharing my marriage bed with another woman?"

She felt him stiffen beside her. "I don't think you were telling the truth,"

she said. "Tyler, I want all of you, not just the part your experience tells you is good for me."

"Sandy," he groaned. "You make me go crazy."

"I'm so glad. You need to go crazy once in a while."

"I have a feeling it may be more than once in a while," he said, beginning to unbraid her hair.

"That will be even better." She felt his hands in her hair. "Why are you doing that?"

"Because as cute as you are with your hair in braids, when I make love to you in a minute, it's the woman in you that I want in my arms."

LATER they dressed again and made sandwiches to eat out on the deck.

"This was the right place to bring you," Tyler said. "You're like the ocean. Wild and constantly changing, generous and nurturing. Calm at times and furious at others. A sea spirit."

"What a nice way to describe a very ordinary person."

"You're not ordinary at all. I've never met anyone like you."

Sandy leaned over the table and gave Tyler a kiss. "You also catch on to things very quickly," he added.

"I've had a good teacher."

When the cold chased them back inside, they lounged in front of the fire, talking about their childhoods. Sandy regaled Tyler with hair-raising tales of her escapades, and he told of a well-ordered youth that had left little time for just enjoying life.

"You've been cheated out of so much," she observed. "Your childhood...then your wife."

"Kay and I had some good years to-

gether. I've regretted her death but never our marriage. However, there were parts of our marriage that were less than perfect." He did not elaborate. He did not need to.

"No marriage is perfect."

"I think if we'd had children, things might have evened out a little, but Kay just didn't like kids. They tend to be noisy and dirty and rude. Being a mother had no appeal for her."

A warm glow spread through Sandy at the thought of giving Tyler the children he had wanted for so long.

"I'll give you children, as many as you want. But I don't know what kind of politician's wife I'll be."

"Have you ever heard me express an interest in running for any office?"

"No," she admitted. "But your mother has talked to me at great length about it."

"My mother should run for president."

Though Sandy knew she could never compete with Kay's memory, she also knew that the time had come to grow up. She would take her place in Tyler's world, and she would make him proud. That much she could do.

BUT BACK in Cameron they slipped into a routine where Tyler worked and Sandy tried to mold herself into the wife she knew he needed. They both became quieter and quieter. Their lovemaking dwindled to nothing. And finally, Tyler began sleeping in another bedroom.

Sadly Sandy began to wonder when the moment would arrive that he would stop sleeping at home at all.

"Tyler," she asked him one night when they were dressing to go out, "were you aware that your parents' for-

tieth wedding anniversary is in three weeks?"

He nodded. "I know."

"We ought to do something special. Don't you think it's time we gave a party and paid back all these invitations?"

"It's awfully close to Christmas. Is that how you want to spend our first Christmas together?"

"At least it will give me something to do while you go off to work," she snapped. "And at least I'll have you at home once for the whole evening."

"Do what you want," Tyler said with a shrug.

Sandy threw herself into the anniversary party as if it might be the one thing that would salvage her marriage.

When she was finished with her plans, she knew this would be the social event of the holiday season.

ALTHOUGH the party plans were going well, there was no time to shop, to bake cookies and fruitcake, to decorate the house or buy a Christmas tree. Sandy promised herself that on Christmas Eve, the day after the party, she would raid the Cameron stores, buying whatever was left for the people on her list.

But there was one present she couldn't ignore. Tyler's could not be a last-minute gift. She rejected every idea she had. Some were too personal, some not personal enough.

She was walking by Cameron's only art gallery when she spotted a large painting of the ocean.

Sandy could almost smell the salt spray. She was filled with such nostalgia that she had to blink back tears. Without looking at the price tag, she handed the gallery owner her charge card and asked

him to deliver the painting on Christmas Eve.

She had no illusions about her future with Tyler. She had tried to be the perfect wife, and he had repeatedly rejected her.

"Merry Christmas, Tyler," she whispered softly as she watched the dealer place the painting in his storage room. "Merry Christmas and goodbye."

SANDY PUT OFF decorating the house for Christmas until the day of the party. Mrs. Lamont had assured her that packed away in the attic were enough decorations to fill the house with good cheer, so Sandy hadn't even bothered to investigate. Whatever was there would do.

"I thought Christmas trees were green and at least *looked* as if they dropped their needles on New Year's Day," she said.

Mrs. Lamont sniffed and left the room.

Although Sandy had no Christmas spirit anyway, seeing the white artificial tree was the final damper on her good-will-to-all. *Maybe once it's decorated it won't be so bad*, she thought. *And next year I'll get Tyler a real one.* But then, there probably wouldn't be a next year for them.

Hours later Sandy stood back and surveyed her handiwork. At home there would be a real pine tree, cut from the MacDonalds' own land, and covered with handmade decorations. The house would smell of cinnamon and love. She was so homesick she wanted to die.

SANDY'S GOWN for the party was a marvel of good taste, elegant style and subtle colors. She hated it.

The crowning blow came after they left the store when Mrs. Hamilton told her that the dress reminded her of one that Kay used to wear.

Sandy had been to a hairstylist that afternoon and had her hair arranged in a low, dignified chignon. The exhausted stylist had pleaded with her to let him cut the unruly locks, but she had hung on to every inch. Not that Tyler would notice, anyway.

"Sandy, have you seen my..." Tyler stopped in the doorway of the room Sandy now occupied, and stared at her. "Where did you get that dress?"

"At MacKent's downtown." She didn't have to ask him what he thought. "I'm afraid I let your mother pick it out. I don't like it, either, but I don't want to hurt her feelings."

"Mother would like the dress. It makes you look older, more sophisticated. The hairstyle helps, too."

She was surprised by the compliment. "Well, that's the impression I was trying to make."

"Congratulations." He turned on his heel and disappeared down the hall as her smile died.

True to his word, Tyler had been absolutely no help with the party. But when guests came streaming through the door, he was at Sandy's side, playing the host and loving husband as if the role had been written for him.

At some moment in the past tension-packed weeks, Sandy had begun to feel better about her in-laws. Mrs. Hamilton was demanding, and she was adamant about Tyler's career in politics, but she was also intelligent and well-read. The two women shared a common interest in the law, and Mrs. Hamilton had confessed that if she were younger, she would have been a politician herself.

Mr. Hamilton seemed to like his new daughter-in-law, too. It was he who asked her how she was feeling, and who seemed to notice that all was not well in Tyler and Sandy's marriage. It was Mr. Hamilton who had pulled her to one side at a crowded charity bazaar and given her a quick hug because she wasn't smiling.

By ten o'clock, the party was in full swing. Sandy was suddenly very, very tired.

"You look absolutely beat."

Sandy looked up to see Tyler's partner, Matthew Stone, standing in front of her with a glass in each hand. "For you," he said. "I noticed you haven't had a thing to drink all evening."

She accepted the glass with gratitude. "Thank you," she said.

"Your husband should be the one taking care of you. Where is Tyler?"

"I have no idea."

Matthew lifted an eyebrow. "So I'm not imagining it. There is something wrong between you."

Sandy said only, "How are things at work?"

"Work has slackened off. I've been able to take quite a bit of time off for the holidays."

"Tyler must be doing all your work, then. He's been busy night and day."

"He doesn't have to be."

Sandy looked at him in disbelief. "What do you mean?"

"December is always a quiet time. Things start up again after the New Year."

"I see."

"I think you're beginning to," Matthew answered carefully. "You and Tyler are both desperately unhappy. If things get any worse, there's not going to be any way out."

"Is Tyler... Does he have another..." She couldn't go on.

"No. He's much too decent to take a mistress when he's married to the woman he loves."

"The woman he loves?"

"Yes. Hasn't he ever told you?"

She shook her head.

For once there was no humor in Matthew's face. "I think I can understand why. The last woman he said it to died in his arms. Tyler may be Georgia's most rational lawyer, but he's as superstitious about his personal life as the next guy."

"Thank you, Matthew." She tried to smile. "It's done me some good to talk about this."

"Then I'm going to give you one piece of parting advice. Give the man what he really wants, not what you think he needs." In a minute he had crossed the room and disappeared into the crowd.

THE DOOR of Tyler's bedroom was shut, but it swung open easily.

When her eyes had adjusted to the darkness, she saw him, facedown on the king-size bed that once they had shared, sound asleep.

She was so relieved that he was there, sleeping alone in his own bed, that she forgot to be angry.

On an impulse she sat gently on the bed and stroked his forehead. He appeared to be having a bad dream, and her hand seemed to soothe him. He sighed, and turned to his side. He mumbled something, and Sandy lowered her head. "Tyler?"

"Kay." He mumbled something else and turned away.

"What, Tyler?" she said louder, not

caring now if she woke him or not. But he had finally fallen into a deep sleep.

Carefully she rose from the bed and covered him with a blanket. In the hallway she leaned against the wall, eyes shut in defeat. Tyler was still in love with his first wife. Sandy could never compete with her memory.

Rousing herself, she went to her room and closed the door. At her dressing table she sat to take the hairpins from her chignon. Her hairbrush was not where she usually kept it, and she peered inside the top drawer. As she removed the brush, her eyes caught an unfamiliar object in the back of the drawer. She drew out a leather picture case and, opening it, stared at the face of her rival.

She stared at the photograph. Kay had been lovely, with a polished beauty that radiated poise and good breeding.

"I wonder what they talked about," she whispered. "I wonder if one ever really knew how the other felt."

She shut the case, placed it back in the drawer and raised her hand to her hair. The face that stared at her from the mirror was familiar, but it was not her own. Her cheeks drained of color. The resemblance was uncanny. Sandy Hamilton and Kay Hamilton could be sisters.

Their features were not the same, but the look of self-control, of wealth and careful sophistication were identical. Sandy had succeeded beyond her wildest dreams. Trying to become a good wife to Tyler, she had taken on the identity of the woman he had once loved.

The irony was that it hadn't worked. With each new bit of her hard-won poise, her husband had slipped farther away from her. Why?

He had married her for the indefinable essence that was Alexandra Kathryn MacDonald. And she had set out im-

mediately to destroy that part of herself. No longer was she his sea spirit. She was an empty shell.

Matthew Stone's words were finally clear. "Give Tyler what he wants, not what you think he needs."

Why had she been trying to give him a carbon copy of his first marriage? Not a man to discuss past intimacies, Tyler had still made it clear that he had loved Kay, but there had been differences between them. He had chosen Sandy with the hope that she could give him what he really wanted in a relationship.

Sandy had the sense of a tremendous burden being lifted off her shoulders. She had not been inadequate. Just confused. And she had allowed her fears to push her into a role she did not want. No longer would she have to pretend to love the social whirl. She could be herself, and perhaps she could make Tyler happy too.

If it wasn't too late.

*

THE NEXT MORNING Sandy lay in bed and pretended to be asleep until she heard Tyler's car pull out of the driveway.

There was a no-nonsense knock at her door, and Mrs. Lamont entered with a breakfast tray.

"I'm glad you're here," Sandy told her. "You and I are going to have a little chat."

"I'm in the middle of polishing the..."

"Stay," Sandy commanded. "You seem tired, Mrs. Lamont," she said finally. "I think you need a long vacation. Starting this afternoon you will be relieved of your duties until the middle of January."

"I take my orders from—"

"Me. Starting today."

"Yes, Mrs. Hamilton."

"And when you come back, you will stay out of the kitchen unless I ask for your help. Understood?"

"I've always cooked for—"

"Not anymore."

"Yes, Mrs. Hamilton."

"This morning," Sandy said, "you will take down all the Christmas decorations we put up yesterday and dispose of them."

"Anything else?" Mrs. Lamont asked.

"That will be all," Sandy said.

"Thank you."

Sandy wolfed down the breakfast, eager to begin putting her plans into action. She dressed carefully in faded jeans and her favorite green sweater. A pair of leather boots completed the picture. "Welcome back," she said to the wholesome young woman in her mirror. "It's so nice to see you again."

She drove into town, parking near Tyler's office to begin her Christmas shopping. The stores were frantic, but she didn't mind. She bought extravagant or silly gifts for everyone on her list.

By lunchtime she finally finished, delivered the last bundle to her car and walked to Tyler's office.

Tyler had already gone to lunch but everyone else was there, and she chatted as Mrs. Howell and Dorothy unwrapped the sexy nighties she had bought them. Matthew was delighted with a first-edition Perry Mason novel.

At Aunt Charlotte's house she parked and then gathered the biggest present of all from the back seat of her car. She was about to ring the doorbell when the old woman flung open the door:

"It's about time you came to see me," she said sternly.

"Merry Christmas, Aunt Charlotte: Will you forgive me?"

"Of course. I was just wrapping your present."

They solemnly traded cages. Aunt Charlotte was as delighted with Sandy's brilliantly plumed parrot as Sandy was to be presented with Julius Squeezer, a huge red bow on his cage.

"Believe me, he's exactly what our house needs," Sandy said sincerely.

"That's what I thought, too. That nephew of mine was never allowed to keep a pet when he was a child. He used to come over here and play with mine."

Tyler had missed a lot in life, Sandy thought sadly. And she knew she had the power to make up for some of it if he would only give her the chance.

AT JUST the hour she had predicted, Sandy heard him open the front door. She remained in the kitchen, humming "Jingle Bells" as she waited for him to find her.

It took about as long as she thought it would. She could picture him moving from room to room downstairs, examining the changes she had made.

Sandy bustled around the kitchen, spooning pan drippings over the glazed ham in the top oven, poking her fork into the sweet potatoes to see if they were done.

The kitchen timer went off, and from the lower oven she pulled out a lemon meringue pie. As she turned to set it on the counter to cool, she saw Tyler standing in the doorway. She stopped, frozen in time.

"How long have you been standing there?" she asked.

"Long enough to think that a miracle has occurred," he said quietly.

Her eyes had fallen to his chest. She knew that when she lifted them, there would be no more barriers between husband and wife. "I'm back," she said, meeting his gaze.

"And how I've missed you," Tyler answered, opening his arms.

She whipped off the flour-covered apron and flew across the kitchen to him. He swung her around and around until they were both breathless, and then held her close as he kissed her repeatedly.

She couldn't get enough of him. He tasted of the crisp winter air and Christmas. She fell in love all over again with the feel of his skin against hers.

Tyler explored her with the same wonder, running his hands down the curves of her body, lifting her with his hands cupped under her bottom. "Love me," she said with a moan.

In a moment he scooped her up in his arms, and strode through the house. She had expected him to take her up to bed, but instead he stopped beside the Christmas tree and set her gently on her feet.

She could feel his hands begin to tremble as he undressed her. The moment was too sweet, and she could only whimper softly each time his hand brushed against her flesh.

With calculated control she unbuttoned his shirt, slowly brushing her fingers across each portion of his body that she uncovered. When they were finally together, with nothing between them, she stood back and waited.

"It's been so long," he said, his voice a hoarse groan. "And I've wanted you so much."

"I'm yours," she answered. "Only yours."

His arms clasped tightly around her, and they were falling to the rug below. They came together with shattering force and she was drowned in shock waves of sensation, her body greedy for what only Tyler could give her. She made him hers, and she knew the exact second when he gave himself to her.

Sandy stirred to life sometime later, still clasped in Tyler's arms. "Tyler, we have to talk."

He nodded, his hair slipping over his forehead. She sat up, brushing the dark strands away and tracing the faint lines of weariness around his eyes. "No matter what else we say tonight, I want to start with the most important thing. I love you."

He didn't answer, pulling her to rest against his chest instead. Then she began. "I love you, but I can't change who I am for you, Tyler. You'll have to take me as I am or not at all."

"What a choice," he said.

"And in exchange," she went on, "I'll stop trying to change you."

This time he was serious. "I've seen the changes in you, sea spirit, but I wasn't aware that you were trying to change me, too."

She was thrilled at hearing the nickname again. "I've been trying to make you love me. It's been putting an awful burden on us both."

It was the hardest thing she had ever had to say.

There was a long silence, but Sandy was no longer anxious. When his reply came, it took her breath away.

"I've been watching you struggle to find your place here, and it's love that's kept me from stopping you. I thought you needed to belong for your own sake, Sandy. I've missed you and needed you,

but I've let you do all this because I love you."

"You love me?" she asked in a small voice.

"I have for a long time."

"But you never told me!"

"I told you in a thousand ways. I married you, I asked you to have my children, I put up with all those damn parties."

"That's true," she said, tears beginning to run down her cheeks. "Tyler, all those 'damn parties' were for you. I thought that if I could be more like Kay, you'd begin to care for me."

Tyler turned her in his arms so that they were facing each other. "Sea spirit, you round out my life. I loved Kay, but we were so alike, we had little to give each other. I can't believe you didn't realize how I felt."

"Listen to me, Tyler Hamilton," Sandy said firmly. "If you're going to live with me, you're going to have to tell me what you think, what you feel. I'm not going to spend any more time trying to guess!"

He bellowed with laughter, falling back on the rug to take her with him. "I can see that things have changed," he said.

"Yes, they have."

"What happened to the Christmas tree?"

"Mrs. Lamont took it home with her."

"What happened to Mrs. Lamont?"

"She's on vacation."

"What happened to the house?"

"I decided to make a home out of it."

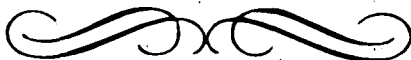
They were on their sides, curled up and smiling at each other. "Don't work too hard on the latter," he warned her with a lazy grin. "Because we aren't going to live here after August."

"August?"

"I've bought seven acres right outside of town with the biggest old oak and magnolia trees you've ever seen." He lifted his head and kissed her. "Merry Christmas from me to you. I love you," he said, kissing the tip of her

nose as he hugged her.

Arm in arm they climbed the stairs, turning for just a second to take one last look at the Christmas tree. It stood, a symbol of what their marriage would be from that day forward. Sturdy, beautiful and very, very real.



**Solution to
CROSSWORD #39
Vol.7 No. 3**

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JULIE KISTLER

Christmas in Toyland



Kristina Castleberry had always been a good girl—listened to her mom, showed up for work on time, tamped her own desire to be a toy designer. But when the madly sexy, wildly wealthy president of Toyland, Tucker Bennett, set his sights on her, Kristina found herself breaking all the rules. And with a little help from a man named Nick, she'd have the best Christmas yet.

“Don’t you just love Christmas?” chirped a fur-coated blonde clutching too many parcels.

Kristina managed a smile, hoping it didn’t look too phony.

It wasn’t even Thanksgiving yet, and Austin’s Department Store had already been bombarding its upscale patrons with holiday cheer for weeks.

It didn’t help matters that Kristina was personally responsible for providing all that Christmas spirit—the elaborate window displays and the lush in-store decorations. And Special Areas—the department she managed—was full to the brim with headaches.

Thankfully, the elevator doors slid open, and Kristina stepped out, taking a breath to fortify herself for her next crisis. Santa!

His elegant velvet wing chair was empty. Nearby, a sign read: Santa is Away for A Moment. Please Come Back!

“He *is* coming back, I hope,” the floor supervisor said. It had taken three weeks of interviews to find a Santa with a résumé good enough for Austin’s.

A low voice interrupted her. “That man is not coming back.”

Mrs. Mirabel Austin, the seventy-something grande dame of the store, swept into view. Where Austin’s was concerned, Mirabel’s eyes missed nothing.

Kristina hurried to make amends. “Hello, Mrs. Austin. So nice to see you. Is there a problem with Santa?”

A wan smile crossed Mirabel’s small,

patrician features. “I fired him. He simply wouldn’t do.”

“No problem,” Kristina managed, wishing she meant it. “I’ll find a new one.”

“Yes, one with distinction, elegance,” Mirabel replied. “It shouldn’t be difficult.”

No, not difficult. Merely impossible.

It was now almost 4:00 p.m. on Tuesday, two days before Thanksgiving. By Friday at 7:00 a.m., when Austin’s doors opened to the biggest shopping day of the year, every kid in Chicago was going to be clamoring to see Santa.

In other words, if she didn’t find a new—and improved—Santa by Friday morning, she might as well kiss her job goodbye.

“HELLO OUT THERE,” Tucker Bennett called loudly into the intercom. “Can we get rid of the Christmas music? It’s not time for that yet, is it?”

His sister Tegan came bursting through his office door.

“Tucker, you don’t need to shout into the speaker! I can hear you just fine.”

“Sorry.” Annoyed with himself for yet again irritating his sister, Tucker tossed the full weight of his long body into the back of the huge leather chair. If he could only get comfortable in this thing.

“I suppose old Mrs. Partridge left instructions that the Christmas music gets turned on—what is it?—the Tuesday before Thanksgiving, and you don’t feel

brave enough to buck tradition, even though she retired six months ago."

"I'm just trying to do a good job!" Tegan protested.

"I know. It's not your fault." Tucker got up and stuffed his hands in his pockets. "The old man's been gone six months, and I still feel like Toyland is his company."

"It is his company," Tegan said. "He still owns sixty percent."

"He's retired, Tegan." Tucker straightened his tie. "I'm the president. And I'm supposed to be acting like one."

"Don't be so hard on yourself, Tucker."

Life had seemed so much easier when he was running the design department. If a toy was wildly impractical, his dad would say no, but Tucker would've had the fun of playing with it anyway. If Toyland's market share was slipping, the buck stopped with the senior Mr. Bennett.

But then Harley Bennett, for forty years the guiding force behind Toyland, Inc., had suffered a heart attack. And suddenly it fell to his oldest son to step in, as Mom and Dad took off on a world cruise, designed to keep the old warhorse out of commission for a good, long time. And Tucker took over the big office, with his sister Tegan pitching in as his assistant and his hotshot little brother, Trey, picking up the slack in Design.

Gone were the work shirts and blue jeans of the design department. Now Tucker was stuck inside Brooks Brothers suits and ties that Trey had picked out for him. Tucker hated them with a passion he couldn't even express.

"POLLY," Kristina called out to her secretary, "do you have that other file of Santa applicants?"

There was no answer except the tick-tock of her wall clock.

Almost eight. Was it that late already?

Her secretary had undoubtedly left hours ago with the rest of the office staff.

"Santa, Santa—my kingdom for a Santa," Kristina muttered, cramming a few files into her briefcase before heading out to her car. There's no such thing as Santa Claus anyway. But Austin's needed one regardless.

Shivering inside her trim wool coat, Kristina turned up the heat in her Toyota as she headed north on the Edens Expressway.

Finally, home was in sight. She had already pulled into the driveway and gotten out of her car to open the garage door when she noticed the strange man standing on the sidewalk near the corner.

Although he seemed grave and composed, there was a funny little half smile around his lips. Clearly, he'd been expecting her. But who was he?

As she gathered her things, Kristina regarded him dubiously. Elderly—at least in his sixties—he carried himself beautifully, even in a green zipped jacket and matching cap. Under the cap he had kind eyes and a neatly trimmed white beard. She couldn't read the inscription on the hat, but it was red-and-white striped, like candy canes.

The reality of the beard hit her all at once. *Heavens to Betsy*, she thought, *it's Santa Claus*.

Then she thought again. "Oh, my God. It can't be," she whispered.

She'd been praying for—and dreading—this moment since she was ten

years old. Now she strode over to where he stood, and demanded, "You're my father, aren't you? I knew you'd come back someday."

"Pardon me," the man said quickly. "But I'm not who you think."

Kristina froze, noting a faint British accent. Disappointment mixed with relief seeped through her. "So you're not my father."

"No, my dear, I'm afraid not. I'm just the postman." He tapped the front of his cap to point out the words *Holiday Courier*: "Or rather, the deliveryman. I work for a specialized service."

Kristina fell very, very still. "I'm really sorry," she managed.

"Oh, no, please don't apologize. It's rather flattering being taken for the father of such a lovely young lady."

"It's just the timing," she told him, trying to muddle through. "My father left—years ago—on Christmas Eve, and I always thought he'd come back at...well, this time of year. Oh, dear."

She was normally so reserved with strangers. What was wrong with her? "Do you have a package for me?"

"Don't worry, Miss Castleberry," he offered kindly, and patted her arm. He took the large, scarred leather pouch that hung at his side, and sifted through its contents. "A very special delivery, as it happens." Finally, he settled on a ragged-looking envelope. "It's rather old, as you'll see."

The envelope looked as if it had gone around the world and back, and the return address was completely obliterated. It was addressed to "Krissie" Castleberry.

"No one's called me Krissie in years," she mused.

"Perhaps eleven years?"

"Well, yes, that's about right. How did you know?"

"Because that's when the letter went astray." He pointed to the faded postmark. "I'm afraid the United States Postal Service misplaced this. It was recently rediscovered in the bottom of an old bin, and I've been asked to hand-deliver it to you, to make sure there's no mistake this time."

"I—I see." Surely if a letter resurfaced after so many years, it had to be significant. Then, *Oh, nonsense*, she told herself firmly.

"Look," she said, sliding the letter into her pocket. "We're both freezing. Why don't you come inside and have some hot chocolate with me?"

It was unlike her to make friends with a virtual stranger on the spur of the moment, but what harm could a cup of cocoa do?

"Why, thank you, Miss Castleberry." His eyes twinkled as he hefted his pouch on his shoulder and accompanied her up the walk, telling her how much he liked her house, even carrying her briefcase when they retrieved it from the car.

"Yes, indeed. This is a lovely home, Miss Castleberry," he repeated.

She had no illusions; there was nothing spectacular about her house.

"Thank you," she said, tossing her coat over the back of an armchair. "You're very kind."

In a flash, he'd found the firewood bin and started a rosy little blaze in her fireplace, something she hadn't done since last winter. The small room became even cozier.

"And that," he told her, pointing to a corner by the stairs, "is where your Christmas tree should be. When will you be putting it up?"

"Oh, I don't usually get one. I'm not

really home enough to enjoy it. And all those needles on the floor—”

His blue eyes were solemn. “Everyone should have a Christmas tree, Kristina.”

“Yes, but...” She broke off suddenly. “You know, Mr.... What is your name, anyway?”

“Um, it’s, well, it’s Nick.”

“Nick...?” She paused. “Nick what?”

Gazing down at the cap in his hands, he offered suddenly, “Nick Holiday. That’s it.”

“Holiday. Oh, of course.” She nodded. “You must own the delivery service.”

“Yes, that’s right,” he said brightly.

“Well, anyway, Mr. Holiday—”

“Nick, please.”

“Nick, then. I had this sudden idea. You’re not the usual Santa Claus type, you know—round and jolly. But you have the beard, and my boss said she wanted someone with class.” The more Kristina thought about it, the better this idea seemed. “What do you think about being Santa for me at Austin’s?” Kristina allowed herself to hope. “We’d put you in a deep, rich color—like maroon instead of red. And a little wreath of holly and ivy on your head, like the old Victorian Santas.”

“I’m afraid I haven’t the vaguest idea what you’re talking about, my dear.”

“Santa Claus!” she told him. “Only Austin’s needs a more upscale version, like Saint Nicholas.” She focused on Nick’s genial face. “That’s odd, isn’t it? Your name is Nick.”

“Quite a coincidence,” he said gravely.

“More like fate.” Kristina shook her head. “Do you believe in fate, Nick?”

“I’m not sure. But I do believe you should open your letter.”

“I suppose I should.”

She strode to her coat, and pulled it out of the pocket. With one quick rip, the envelope was open and the letter lay before her. Its brightly colored masthead caught her eye immediately.

“Oh, my God,” she whispered. “It’s from Toyland. I haven’t thought about them in years.”

Dear Krissie Castleberry,

Congratulations! Your design for Santa’s Magic Workshop is one of the five finalists in the “Toyland Christmas Toy Supersearch Contest”!

If your Santa’s Magic Workshop is chosen as the best of the best, it will be mass-produced by Toyland, Inc. for sale as our *premier* Christmas toy for the season.

Again, we offer our heartiest congratulations. Here’s hoping *your* toy becomes the biggest success story since the teddy bear!

Merry Christmas from your friends at Toyland!

Yours,

Tucker Bennett

Toyland Inc. Marketing Department

“A finalist...” she murmured. “All those years ago, and I never knew. I can’t believe it.”

“Who is it from?” Nick asked, as he helped himself to a mug and a cocoa envelope.

She had the funniest feeling he knew before she told him. “Toyland, the toy company. They sponsored a contest

every year when I was a kid." She looked up. "Here, Nick, use the microwave."

"A contest?"

"To design a Christmas toy." Smiling wanly, she went on, "I fancied myself a toy designer, you see, so I entered their contest." She bit her lip. "I thought I'd die if I didn't win. I was so sure. Anyway, I watched my mailbox every day for a letter."

"I'm sure the postal service regrets the error."

"What? Oh, sure."

Glancing again at the lines of the letter, she couldn't help but remember the girl she'd been, daring to dream, even though her mother thought she was being ridiculous. And Mother had been right, as far as Kristina knew then.

So she'd gotten her MBA and gone to work for a computer giant. And just last year, she'd moved up and into the plum job she now held at Austin's.

"What was your toy, Kristina?"

"Oh." She smiled, remembering. "Santa's Magic Workshop. It was all in miniature—like a gingerbread house, only the roof came off so you could play with the stuff inside. There was a fireplace with tiny logs, and a comfy chair for Santa, a workbench and a whole bunch of little toys to paint and put together."

"It sounds lovely."

"It was."

"Kristina, my dear, I hate to interrupt," Nick said tentatively, "but the cocoa in the—what was that thing...?"

"Microwave?"

"I don't think it's getting any hotter," he said.

"You've never used a microwave before, have you, Nick?" she asked, as she went to click it on.

"No," he replied. "I have a wood-burning stove."

"Where do you live, Nick? The woods?"

"Well, I prefer the outdoors, and I like it cold. So I live..."

Busy stirring the cocoa, Kristina missed his hesitation. "Up north?" she asked.

"Yes," he said. "Way up north."

"Hmm." She handed him a mug.

"As in Canada? Minnesota?"

"Minnesota. That's it. Minnesota."

"I hear it's beautiful there."

Nick's eyes seemed far away. "It is. Deep, deep snow, and the air so cold and clean...."

Funny, but it hadn't occurred to her that Nick and Holiday Courier might be based out-of-state. "I suppose it's too much to hope that you'd be willing to take a job here? Even for a little while?"

"This Santa business?"

Nodding, she set her cocoa down.

"What are you planning to do about Toyland?"

She shrugged. "It's nice to know I might've won after all, but there's nothing I can do about it now."

"No?"

"You think there's something I should do?"

"Oh, no, I wouldn't presume. That's *your* decision." His mild blue eyes held her. "But I might consider very carefully, if I were you, and make sure I really knew what I wanted to do."

"And you think about the Santa job, okay?" His expression was too ambiguous to read, but she pressed on. "As a favor to me, if nothing else."

"I shall give it due consideration."

"Good. And since you don't live in town, if you need a place to stay..."

Even she didn't believe her words.

Kristina Castleberry was turning into Lady Bountiful all of a sudden. But she couldn't bear to think of this sweet old man wandering the streets alone.

"I shall consider it," he said again.

As he turned to leave, she suddenly realized she had no way to find him again. "Nick, wait! Is there somewhere I can reach you?"

"Why don't I contact you?" he suggested. "Tomorrow, one way or the other, at Austin's."

With that he ambled down her front walk and disappeared down the street, and she found herself humming "Santa Claus Is Comin' to Town."

*

THE LETTER from Toyland just sat there, looking at her, no matter how hard she tried to ignore it.

"I'm not going to dredge up something that died ten years ago," she told herself firmly, and pulled a heavy folder over on top of it.

Okay, back to the latest crisis. A whole shipment of Christmas decorated gourmet chocolates had gotten frozen en route to Austin's, and she had to track down who'd screwed up and get the shipment replaced.

But her mind wasn't on chocolates.

"It could have been so great."

"What's that?" her secretary asked, edging her way through the door with a new pile of folders.

"Oh, uh, chocolates," Kristina improvised.

Polly, a plump young woman with lousy clerical skills but a very good disposition, shrugged. "If you ask me, chocolates are always pretty darned good," and she dumped the files onto Kristina's desk.

"Wait, Polly, before you go—have I gotten any calls today?"

"Sure, lots. Any one in particular you want to know about?"

"Nick, my Santa Claus. He still hasn't called?"

"Kristina!" Polly protested. "You've already asked about him a million times."

"I know." Kristina tried to get back to the chocolate problem. She managed to stay hard at work for at least five minutes before Polly interrupted.

"Excuse me, Kristina, but you did say to let you know right away if that Nick guy—"

"Nick? He called? Is he still on the line?"

"He's here."

"Great! Bring him in, will you?"

And then there he was, standing in the doorway, hat in hand.

"What are you going to do about Toyland?" he asked.

Kristina rose from her desk. "What's to do? Toyland is yesterday's news. Let's talk about today's news, okay? I'm so glad you've decided to be Saint Nicholas for me."

"I haven't actually decided yet."

"No?" Disappointed, Kristina sat back down. "Why not?"

"I'd like to help you, it's just that I'm rather busy myself at this time of year."

Kristina nodded. "Deliveries, of course."

"I do have very good helpers back at home, but I don't feel quite right, leaving them to manage alone."

"Nick, I need you. What can I do to get you to accept?"

"Well, there is one thing...."

"Yes?" she asked eagerly. "Name it, and I'll do it."

"I want you to answer your letter.

from Toyland. It's never too late to pursue a dream."

"But I can't—" She broke off. "It's impossible, Nick. My future is in being a manager. That's what I'm good at. Toys were a dream, but I have to be practical."

"You don't always have to be practical," Nick said. "Besides, you're being half practical at least, since it will get you the Santa Claus you so desperately need."

"Well, that's true enough," she said dubiously.

"One week from today, I want you to have made an appointment with the head man at Toyland."

"One week, huh?"

"One week." Laying his hat on her desk, Nick bowed. "And in the meantime, you have acquired a new Santa. My humble person is at your service."

"Nick, you're a lifesaver."

"TUCKER, what are you doing?"

He glanced up uneasily. "Nothing. Why?"

His younger brother frowned, giving a gloomy cast to a face so much like Tucker's they could've been twins. "Why are you dressed like that? You know we have a press conference." He gestured toward Tucker's faded blue Bears jersey and cutoff sweatpants.

"I know." He grinned. "Look, Trey, I need a break. I'm going out to shoot some hoops."

"Tucker, you can't—" his brother began as Tucker fished a basketball out from under his desk.

"Tucker, what do you think you're doing?" Tegan whispered from the doorway, easing the door shut behind

her. "You've got a room full of appointments out there."

"Cancel them."

"You can't cancel appointments that are already here," Trey said.

"Then you talk to them. You know more about this stuff than I do, anyway." And without further comment, Tucker slid open the window on the far wall, then fit his long body through the opening. Both his siblings watched in disbelief.

Tegan trailed after him as far as the window.

As he jumped off the garage roof and landed on the ground, he called, "Toss me the ball, will you?"

Shaking her head, she retrieved the ball and pitched it out after him. Within moments, he was on the Toyland basketball court, happily perfecting his hook shot. "I don't believe this."

"Face it, Teeg, he's a disaster as a manager." Trey shot her a hopeful look. "He'd take it better if you told him to step down."

"He's not stepping down, so you might as well forget it. It would kill him to think he disappointed Dad." Turning from the window, Tegan sighed. "What am I going to do with his appointments? One woman has been waiting all afternoon."

Trey grinned. "Is she good-looking?"

"Actually, she is. In a prissy kind of way—hair pulled back, tiny gold earrings, knockout suit." Noting the look in his eye, she added, "And much too old for you."

"Sounds perfect," he told her. "Just my type. Why should Tucker have all the fun?"

KRISTINA COULDN'T believe what she was hearing. "What do you mean, he's not available? Why couldn't somebody tell me that hours ago?"

The young man shrugged. "Sorry. A business emergency came up. But I'd be happy to help if I can."

There was no way this youngster could help her, even if he was pretty cute, with his clear blue eyes and impish smile.

"Well, Mr. Tucker Bennett who cancels his appointments, you don't know Kristina Castleberry," she said under her breath.

The youngster grinned amiably. "I'd like to. Kristina, was it?"

Surprised, she lifted her gaze in time to catch the sly look on his face. He seemed eager to please. "Could you get me in to see him for a few minutes?"

But he shook his head. "I wish I could, but he's tied up...for a while, and then he has a press conference. If you could wait till after that," he said, "I might be able to corner him for a few minutes."

She looked doubtfully at her watch, only too aware of how long she'd been way from her own office. After all, she had lied about having a doctor's appointment. "I can't wait that long. I really have to get back to the city."

He reached past her to open the door into the hall. "This way. I'd be happy to walk you out. I'm Trey Bennett, by the way. And I'm very happy to meet you."

Kristina smiled back. "Nice to meet you, Trey."

Toyland's main offices were in a four-story Victorian house way out in St. Charles, a pretty little town some forty miles west of Chicago.

Because the layout was relatively

simple, she didn't need help finding her way out of Mr. Bennett's office, but her young admirer insisted, leading her back behind the receptionist, into a rabbit warren of cubicles and desks, bulletin boards and drafting tables.

"Marketing," he told her. "And that's Personnel."

Trey led her through the marketing department and into what was still a kitchen.

"By the way," he said, "if you should change your mind and come by later, this back door is always open. After business hours, I'm sure I could get you as much time with Tucker as you want."

"No, I don't think so—" she began.

"Well, whatever—if you decide to come back tonight, look for me on the third floor." And he opened the back door for her. "See you later, Kristina."

"I'm not coming back," she told him.

She was still mumbling under her breath as she made her way down Toyland's sidewalk. The persistent sound of a hard ball pounding against cement invaded her consciousness.

Directly ahead of her was a full-size basketball court, carved out of the next-door lot. This one had the regulation two hoops, lines painted on the cement and even lights for night games. *Toyland must really be into employee physical fitness*, she decided.

Especially if the lone player was any indication. He was tall and slim, with the kind of easy grace she drooled over in secret when she saw the likes of Michael Jordan or Joe Montana. As she watched, the man spun and then sent a fifteen-foot jump shot swishing through the net.

Clutching her briefcase, she forced herself to stop gawking and start walk-

ing. But when she tried to ignore his body, she saw his face.

It was the mirror image of the youngster who'd escorted her outside, but this one's light brown hair was a tad shaggier, and his face was stronger, more clearly defined, with character lines etched around his eyes. This one was older.

And suddenly it all became clear. Two men who looked so much alike must be brothers. And Toyland was a small, family-run company.

Chewing her lip thoughtfully she narrowed her gaze at Mr. Wonderful. *He* was Tucker Bennett. And he'd skipped out on her appointment to play basketball.

She swept down the sidewalk and past the basketball court. "I'll be back, Mr. Bennett," she promised him, even though he was well out of hearing range. "You haven't seen the last of Kristina Castleberry."

IT WAS DARK and cold by the time she returned to Toyland. Gathering the wisps of her courage together, she put her head down into the wind and angled around to the back of the house. As promised, the back door was open, and she slid right in.

Toyland was completely silent and eerily dark as she made her way through the first floor and up the stairs. Finally, when she reached the third-floor landing, she heard muffled voices and crept down the corridor toward them.

As she raised her hand to knock and announce herself, the door marked Playroom swung open a few inches on its own. It was unnerving and she stepped away from the door.

"Tucker!" she heard Trey's voice. "You can't be serious!"

"Little brother, if I wanted your advice, I'd ask for it."

That voice could only belong to Tucker Bennett. And what a voice it was—deep and rich, with a hint of a growl.

"Give me some credit here, Trey. Faster and flashier, not more expensive, is the answer."

The voice continued in an undertone, keeping time with a series of footsteps that paced across the hardwood floor inside.

Kristina took another step back, but as she edged away, a worn floorboard creaked loudly under her foot. The footsteps inside the room stopped abruptly.

"Who's there?" Tucker Bennett called out. "Come on in and join the fun, especially if you're on my side."

Accepting her fate, Kristina slid in around the door. And there he was, all six-foot-whatever of him wearing worn jeans, a softly tattered flannel shirt unbuttoned over a white T-shirt and an openly curious light in his blue, blue eyes.

He smiled and then stood there, looking at her, while she did her best to get her heart to start beating again.

"Hello," she said finally, sticking out a hand. "I'm—"

"Kristina!" Trey interrupted. "Glad you could make it."

She offered him a smile. "Hello again, Trey."

"What a shame," Tucker said with a sigh. "You're with him."

"Well, not really. Actually I came to see you."

"Smart girl," Tucker said.

"Kristina was one of the appointments you canceled this afternoon,"

Trey shot back. "I told her to come in tonight when you'd be more likely to talk business." He turned to Kristina. "This is my brother, Tucker Bennett."

"Nice to meet—" she began, when Trey broke in.

"Did you hear that?"

Kristina was mystified and Tucker seemed confused. "Hear what?"

"The fax," his brother said. "This could be it!"

Nodding, Tucker said, "Let's hope so. And that the news is good."

Kristina looked at them. "Excuse me?"

"We've been waiting for the first of the Christmas retail figures," Tucker explained. "Maybe this is finally it."

"Come on, Tucker," Trey put in, as Tucker turned to Kristina.

"Do you mind excusing us for a few minutes?"

"No, of course not."

Humming to herself to fill the silence, Kristina turned around and let her eyes wander around the big space they called the playroom.

While Tucker had been in the room, she hadn't noticed much else. But now...

Uncarpeted and unadorned, it was a big, practical room, overflowing with bits and pieces of toys and games from every possible surface. Above her, a host of kites hung from the high ceiling, their bright tails dipping to touch the roof of an elaborate dollhouse in one corner and an equally impressive castle on the opposite side. She bent to peer inside the dollhouse, catching a glimpse of miniature Persian rugs and dark wood furniture. It was exquisite.

In the middle of the room, two huge tables took up most of the available space. The larger one held the most

complicated train set she'd ever seen, with hills and valleys and several towns for the train to pass through. The other table was heaped high with glue and scissors and tape, pieces of scenery and track, and enough cords and batteries to keep the Pentagon running.

"Wow," she whispered. She shook her head at the sheer size of the place. "What could this possibly have been?"

From behind her, Tucker cut in before she'd realized he was back.

"It was originally a studio when the house was built in the 1890s," he said easily. "The lady of the house was a retired ballerina, and her husband built her a place to dance."

It was irritating that he'd interrupted her reverie and guessed what she'd only whispered. "How did you hear my question?"

"I didn't. It was written all over your face. Anyway, my folks bought the house in the fifties and moved the company headquarters here. This seemed like the natural place to play with our toys—to see if they worked—if they were fun."

"It's wonderful," she murmured. "You're in charge now, right?"

"Right."

Behind them, Trey snorted. "That's debatable."

Kristina turned. "Did you get the news you were hoping for?"

"Sort of," Trey allowed grumpily.

"Trey, don't start this again, please? We have a visitor, and I'm sure she doesn't want to hear your complaints about my management style—"

"That's a laugh." Trey interrupted him. "You don't have a management style. Or do you call *neglect* a style?"

There was a long pause.

Finally Tucker spoke. "Maybe you'd

better go somewhere and cool down, little brother. Before you say something you regret."

"My only regret is that I didn't say this sooner, while there was still time to convince Dad to leave *me* in charge."

"Call him up," Tucker suggested softly. "I'm sure there are phones on cruise ships. Let's see if he changes his mind."

Anger colored Trey's face and he stalked out the playroom.

Kristina stayed where she was, trying to seem inconspicuous. She hated arguments.

"Oh." Tucker's blue eyes were wide and unconcerned. "What was it you wanted to talk to me about?"

"I don't think this is a good idea," she managed to say. "I've kind of changed my mind about it."

"No, no, that's okay. You can tell me now." A wan smile curved his mouth. "About the thing with Trey—we've been through this more times than I can remember. Brothers—you know."

She shrugged helplessly. "I'm an only child."

"It's just a difference in philosophy. We'll patch it up," he added. "We always do."

A lock of hair had slipped down to ruffle his forehead, and she had an overwhelming urge to tuck it back where it belonged. A very dangerous urge, considering she was all alone here with the engaging Tucker Bennett so late at night. "I—I'd better be going," she told him.

"No, wait. You have to give me your name so I can watch out for you, when you make a new appointment."

"Kristina Castleberry," she told him.

"That's Kristina with a *K*."

His pen stopped in midscrawl. "Castleberry? As in George Castleberry?"

"My father? What do you know about my father?"

*

"DO YOU BELIEVE IT, Nick?" She was so keyed up, she couldn't think of sleep. All the way home from Toyland; she'd tried to make sense of this development.

Thank goodness Nick was still up—he'd been staying with her for almost a week now—so she had someone to talk to when she got home.

"Tucker said my father has been writing letters to Toyland, proposing toy ideas, steadily for the past fifteen or twenty years." She shook her head. "I still can't believe it."

Nick smiled. "Tucker, is it?"

"Now, Nick." She poked around in the kitchen cabinet for some crackers. "I know you have this bee in your bonnet about Toyland, but trying to fix me up with Tucker Bennett isn't going to help."

Nick only smiled.

Dangling the whole packet of crackers, Kristina allowed a picture of the wayward toy inventor to sneak into her brain. "I will admit that he's...interesting," she murmured. "He has very blue eyes—and his voice, well, I've never heard a voice like that before. Low, kind of rough, kind of...intimate. Tucker Bennett is one of those guys who smiles and just takes your breath away...."

"And how did Mr. Bennett react to Santa's Magic Workshop?"

"I didn't tell him."

"But, Kristina, wasn't that the purpose of the visit?"

"Well, yes. But Tucker and his

brother had an argument, and it didn't seem like a good time. And after he dropped the bomb about my father, well, it definitely wasn't a good time."

"And what happened next?"

"Well, I asked him what he knew, and he said not much, that my dad had been sending in these crackpot ideas. You might say that he's a legend around Toyland."

"Is that good or bad?"

"Terrible," she said softly. "And it looks like the Magic Workshop is on the shelf for good. I didn't exactly leave Toyland with Tucker dying to hear my idea."

"What do you mean?"

"After he told me about all the letters from my father, Tucker said I could see the files sometime if I wanted an address. To try and reach him."

"And what did you do?"

"I didn't do anything. When he said that about the address, I panicked and I bolted. He undoubtedly thinks I'm nuts, too, the crazy daughter of a lunatic toy inventor...."

"Kristina," Nick said firmly, "it's late and you're being much too hard on yourself. I'm sure the young gentleman does not think you are a lunatic. Now, you have some very important issues to ponder," Nick said. "So I suggest you try to get some sleep and do just that."

"Ponder while I sleep?"

"Certainly."

"But I've never felt so awake in my life!"

"Come along now," the older man directed, leading her toward the stairs. "One of the reasons I agreed to accept your hospitality during my Santa Claus tenure was that I perceived a very great need here."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that you have been neglecting yourself, but now that I am here, you must eat and rest properly. Or my name isn't..."

"Nick Holiday," she finished for him.

"Yes, that's right." His smile grew even more mischievous.

FROWNING, Tucker hung up the phone. Why couldn't he get through to Kristina? If her secretary was passing on his messages, she must know that he was trying to reach her. But days had gone by, and she still hadn't responded. But why?

Maybe he should try her at home again. Another message on her answering machine couldn't hurt.

But to his surprise, a respectable older man's voice announced, "Miss Kristina Castleberry's residence."

It sounded like the butler.

"Is Kristina there, please?"

"No, I'm sorry. I believe she plans to be away all evening. Of course, I should be happy to relay a message."

"I, uh..." Tucker persevered. "The last time I saw her, she was kind of upset. I just wanted to make sure she was okay."

"She's fine." There was a judicious silence. "You wouldn't by any chance be Mr. Tucker Bennett?"

He was mystified. "Yes, I am," he answered. "I've been trying to reach her for several days."

"Of course you have," the man said cheerfully. "And I've been trying to get her to return your calls. She has the most wonderful idea she really ought to tell you about."

"Idea?"

"For a toy. It's simply lovely. She

came to see you about it, but when she learned about her father, I'm afraid it quite put the toy idea out of her head."

"So she does want to see me?"

"Oh, no, she doesn't. But she should."

"I don't understand."

"I'm not a bit surprised." The cultured voice lowered. "Confidentially, I don't think Kristina understands either."

"Okay," Tucker said. "And who exactly are you?"

"Call me Nick. Everyone does."

"Sure. Are you Kristina's uncle? Grandfather?"

"No, no. Simply a friend. Kristina has kindly extended her hospitality while I undertake a position at Austin's. It's a lovely store. Have you been there, Tucker?"

"No, not recently." He asked casually, "And what do you do at the store?"

"Why, I'm Santa Claus."

"I see. How nice for you."

"I'm quite enjoying myself, actually. A change of pace." Nick went on, "But you haven't called to chat with me, have you, Mr. Bennett? As I said, I'll be happy to give Kristina your message. But I can't guarantee that she'll ring you back. She seems to think you wouldn't want to see her again."

"But I do," Tucker said quickly.

"Yes. Might I tell her why?"

"I'm not exactly sure."

Tucker tried to sort it out. It was partly because she was very pretty; he'd allow that. It wasn't every day beautiful young women with long, dark hair and prim, cherry-red suits slipped into Toyland. And he knew she was his "type"; he had a thing for cool, professional women. After all, his ex-wife was the

same type—hell, Vanessa even wore the same kind of suit.

But Kristina was different, too. Maybe it was the way her eyes had gotten all round and soft when she'd taken a good look at the playroom.

"I'd like to see if I could help," he answered finally.

Nick chuckled. "I don't think she'd like to hear you say that. Our Kristina doesn't think she needs anyone's help."

That fit the profile, but it didn't dissuade him. "Will you tell her I called, that I'd like to see her?"

"I think I can do better than that," his newfound friend declared. "Here's the thing—Kristina has gone off to a party tonight, a benefit where I believe anyone is welcome who cares to make a rather substantial contribution...." There was a long pause. "Do you own a dinner jacket, Mr. Bennett?"

KRISTINA SIPPED champagne from a fine crystal flute, and wished the Austins kept their ballroom less chilly.

"I also wish I'd brought a date," she murmured.

"Don't talk to yourself, darling," her mother said, sliding into place next to her. "People will think you're odd."

Just what she needed. Kristina loved her mother, really she did. She just didn't need to see or hear her at this moment. She made herself smile. "Hello, Mother. How are you doing? You look wonderful."

"Thank you, darling."

Bitsy Austin, formerly Betty Castleberry, was a vision of pastels and creams, with her pale, perfect skin and cool blond hair.

Bitsy prided herself on knowing exactly what to wear; it had been her call-

ing card as a manager of Posh, Austin's designer boutique. Tonight she wore a cream-colored sheath, hand beaded, elegant and very expensive.

Examining her daughter, Bitsy said, "You look so tired, darling. The outfit is nice, though. Did I buy you that?"

The outfit in question was a plain black silk dinner suit, with a long, double-breasted jacket over wide trousers. "Nope, sorry," Kristina smiled. "I got this one on my own."

"Very nice. Anyway," Bitsy went on, "the point is that in this business appearance is everything."

Kristina took a long swallow of champagne. "I thought tonight was a social occasion."

"Darling...when Mirabel is your boss, no occasion is purely social. Besides, they...think you can't handle the job if you look all worn-out and frazzled."

"But, Mother, I *am* worn-out and frazzled."

Bitsy clicked her tongue. "Oh, Kristina. Sometimes you worry me." It was the first volley in a familiar argument. "You know, darling, Windy only gave you the job as a favor to me."

"Yes, Mother, I know."

At first, Kristina had been delighted her mother was marrying Windham "Windy" Austin. After all, the man was stinking rich, and he wasn't even a bad guy. He'd lived under the thumb of his own domineering mother, Mirabel, for so long, Kristina knew he'd knuckle under to Bitsy without a whimper.

And he had. Betty, now called Bitsy to sound more upscale, had resigned her position at Austin's to concentrate on being Windy's pampered wife, and then she'd maneuvered her daughter into the plum job in Special Areas.

"Windy really went out on a limb for you," Bitsy admonished, "so you have to do an absolutely fabulous job to show him—and that evil little mother of his—how deserving you are of his support and trust."

"I'm trying, Mother."

"I know you are, darling." Dashing away an imaginary spot of dust on her daughter's lapel, Bitsy beamed. "But you must try harder. Austin's is a demanding place to work. So, when I tell you—" Bitsy went on, but Kristina cut in.

"Are you enjoying yourself tonight, Mother? Mirabel really outdid herself with this one, didn't she?"

"La-di-da," Bitsy tossed off. "They're all the same."

"And where is Windy tonight?"

"No doubt Mirabel has cornered him somewhere to rail at him about the store," Bitsy sniffed.

Kristina wondered what her mother would do if she was reminded of the lecture *she'd* just been handing out. But she chose to sip her champagne and keep her mouth shut.

"And what are you up to these days, darling?"

"Hmm. What have I been doing?" She knew better than to mention anything about Toyland, ten-year-old toy designs or the fact that she'd recently stumbled over evidence of her father's continued existence. "Not much," she said finally. "Working hard. You know Christmas."

"Of course," Bitsy smiled. "I always loved Christmas at the store. The days just fly by when you work that hard."

Kristina had come to the conclusion that she and her mother were cut from different cloth. Mother was a workaholic, and Kristina yearned for some-

thing creative and fun like designing toys. Not that she dared tell her mother that.

ACROSS THE ROOM, Tucker almost caught her gaze, but it skittered away too quickly. Had she seen him? He didn't think so and he backed off, leaning against a wall behind a potted palm.

He wasn't quite ready for Kristina to see him yet. He needed a game plan first.

Waiters in tuxedos carried silver trays of champagne and extravagant little hors d'oeuvres around in a never-ending circle that he could've intercepted, if he'd wanted to. But he hated the stuff. Luckily, he'd thought to drive through McDonald's on the way there.

Calculating his next move, he ventured another glance at Kristina, who was tossing back champagne as she chatted politely with a small blonde. Her boss, he figured. But not a friend. Not if Kristina's attitude was any indication.

"Well, if she's bored, I can fix that," he said with an easy grin. "Tucker Bennett to the rescue."

AS HER MOTHER continued in the same vein—something about gratitude—Kristina delicately downed the last drops of her third glass of champagne.

Looking down at the empty glass, she caught the shine of a silver tray in the periphery of her vision. "Waiter!" she called. As she held out her glass, she noticed how the light from the chandelier shot color through the fluted crystal. "Hmm," she said, "isn't that pretty?"

"Beautiful," returned a deep, resonant voice.

Once again, that voice undressed her, caressed her.

"Tucker," she whispered. It couldn't be true. But there he was.

"At your service," he said softly.

Neatly, before she'd even noticed, he removed the empty glass from her fingertips, set it on a waiter's tray and sent the young man away.

She tried not to notice how *fine* he looked, with the black-and-white elegance of his evening clothes emphasizing his broad shoulders and long, lean torso. He looked wonderful, from the top of his tawny head to the tips of his shoes. Her scrutiny stopped there.

The man was wearing black canvas high-tops with formal evening wear. Her eyes met his in disbelief.

"Well, they are black," he offered.

He presented her with a bright, breezy smile, and she felt the corners of her own mouth curve up in response.

"Oh, uh... champagne," she said suddenly. "I was planning on another glass. Can you get the waiter back?"

"Are you driving tonight?"

"Of course."

"Then maybe you'd better lay off."

"What do you mean—?" she began, but her mother cut in.

"Sensible young man," Bitsy offered, catching Kristina's elbow and hissing, "Drinking so much in public? Good Lord, Kristina! And who is he?"

"We haven't met," he said smoothly, stepping into their conversation. "I'm Tucker Bennett."

"Bitsy Austin," she replied. "Kristina's mother."

"Oh, really. Why, you look too young to be anybody's mother," he said, giving her a charming grin.

Bitsy began to warm up. "What a lovely young man. And how do you know Kristina, Mr. Bennett. I'm usually acquainted with Kristina's escorts."

"That's because you usually arrange them," Kristina said under her breath.

"As a matter of fact, I met Kristina when she came out to my company."

"Your company?" Bitsy asked. "What company is that?"

Alarms flashed in Kristina's brain. *Whatever you do, don't say the word Toyland.* Before he could, she jumped in.

"Tucker is the president of a company out in St. Charles. I was out there on business—for Austin's—and I happened to run into him."

"President, did you say? Well, isn't that nice?"

"My father retired earlier this year, and I've taken over," Tucker added.

"How very interesting," Bitsy cooed. "But I must say I'm surprised to see you pop up this evening."

"So am I," Kristina murmured.

Bitsy linked her arm through Tucker's. "Now tell me more about this company of yours."

"To—" he began as Kristina took his other arm and yanked him around behind her.

"I really need to talk to you," she insisted.

"No problem," he murmured, moving in even closer.

When his hot breath ruffled her hair and his long arm casually pulled her up against him, she gasped. She forced a smile for her mother's benefit.

Bitsy's severely arched eyebrows spoke volumes.

"Excuse us?" Kristina asked. "It's important."

Bitsy murmured, "I'll just bet it is."

Tucker held on to her firmly as Kristina managed to pull them both out of her mother's vicinity.

"I didn't know you wanted to be

alone with me so desperately," he whispered in her ear.

She forced herself to think rationally. "Why did I drink so much champagne?" she lamented.

"I don't know," he answered. "Maybe you were having a rotten time and wanted to get smashed."

"I don't do that kind of thing."

"You did tonight."

Taking his arm again, she marched him to the far end of the ballroom, where the potted palms took over and the crowds thinned.

"I still can't believe you showed up," she said dazedly.

His face was all innocence. "What do you take me for? I'm the president of a company—I get invited to these things all the time."

"You mean you paid to get in?" He nodded. "But, Tucker! This thing cost a thousand dollars."

He shrugged. "I decided to kick in for a good cause. And I wanted to see you again."

"See me?" she whispered. "For a thousand dollars? You've got to be kidding."

He just looked at her and finally asked, "Would you like to take a walk outside?"

"Outside?"

He nodded. "These doors open on the garden, don't they?"

"Well, there's a terrace, and then formal gardens. But, Tucker, it can't be more than thirty or forty degrees out."

"Do you have a coat?"

"You're crazy!"

"I've been told that." Clasp ing her hand, he tugged her out the door.

"Look, it's beautiful," he whispered in that gorgeous voice of his. His thumb caressed her palm. "A hunter's moon."

She felt a chill creep up her spine, but not from the temperature. In fact, it wasn't all that cold. It was an odd night, slightly hazy.

"I'm afraid you're mistaken," she returned primly. "A hunter's moon is a full moon. This one is only a crescent." *You're babbling*, she told herself, but she couldn't seem to stop. "And a hunter's moon is in October or something."

"Good grief. I should've known. I keep telling myself, don't go after smart women, they're—"

"You're going after me?" Her hand on his sleeve, she forced him to turn and face her. One high heel wobbled slightly. *Damn that champagne.*

"Is it that hard to understand?"

"But you just met me, only a week ago."

"I like you."

She shook her head. "You don't even know me."

"I saw you at Toyland. You feel the same way I do about it." He lifted a finger to trace the curve of her cheek. "Why shouldn't I pursue a beautiful woman when I see one?"

She tilted away. "I'm hardly beautiful."

"Who told you that?"

"Tucker," she warned, "this isn't going to work. I don't know why you're being so nice to me, but I know what kind of impression I made at Toyland. I'm sorry I behaved like a fool, running out of there like that."

He shuffled impatiently. "You didn't. You acted like a normal person who heard surprising news."

"Look, this is all very kind, but I don't want to talk about it, okay? Since we're already out here freezing, you might as well see the grounds. They're

a lot nicer in the summer, of course, but there's still a medge haze—"

"A medge haze?"

"A maze. The hedges make a maze," she said slowly.

"The medge haze it is," he declared, and strolled after her, much more mobile in sneakers than she was in her high heels. Trying to set a lively pace, she almost slipped several times, before he took her arm firmly and pulled her in close.

If only his long, hard body didn't feel so warm and so right.

"Kristina," he ventured, "now that we're in the maze, you do know how to get out, don't you?"

"Sort of."

"Young lovers found frozen in winter maze...."

She cleared her throat. "We're hardly lovers."

"That can be remedied."

"Well," she said, breaking away and spinning to face him, "we're not all that young, either."

"Young enough. I'm thirty-four."

"You don't act thirty-four."

"I know. But my twenty-two-year-old brother does. So I can act twenty-two in his place. Except as president of Toyland, when I have to act about fifty-five."

A giggle escaped her. "I see." It escalated into a full-blown laugh. "Tucker, you're so...odd."

He brightened. "Thank you."

Slowing her steps, she watched for several seconds. "You really came here tonight just to see me?"

"I told you I did."

"But how did you know where I was?"

"Oh. Nick told me. And he told me he was Santa Claus."

"He shouldn't have told you anything," she said. She couldn't look away from the hot light in his eyes.

"If he's Santa Claus, does that make you my Christmas present?"

"I—I don't think so." Suddenly suspicious, she inquired, "He didn't mention anything else, did he?"

There was a pause before he said, "He told me that you have a wonderful toy idea."

"I knew there was more. That darn Nick...."

His eyes continued to hold her. "So far, you haven't said a word about an idea. Why not?"

The answer leaped into her brain. *Because I couldn't bear for you, of all people, to think Santa's Magic Workshop is stupid.*

Instead, she said, "It's not that good an idea. And my father—"

"Your father sent in a truckload of bad ideas. Do you think he's the only one? And even if he were, so what?"

He swore quietly and glared at a spot on the ground. "If you ever wanted to know if your idea was any good," he said, "now's your chance. Tell me."

She managed to say, "Santa's Magic Workshop." She glanced up.

"That's a start. Go on."

"It's not that easy to describe."

"But you came to my office all ready to sell me on it. So you must have had some idea of what you wanted to say."

"I was going to start with the contest. The Supersearch Contest."

"The one that we ran at Toyland? Okay, so you entered this idea of yours in our contest?"

"Yes, that's right."

"But you didn't win? Look, Kristina, don't let that bother you. I mean, you were only a kid, right?"

"I was eighteen. But I did win—sort of. At least, I was a finalist. You signed the letter, and that's why I came to see you."

"Ten years later?"

"Actually, it's eleven. The letter got lost in the mail or something. When it was found, Nick was hired to deliver it. And he decided I should resurrect Santa's Magic Workshop, and contact you."

"Wait a minute. Are you trying to tell me that Nick came to deliver a letter and never left?"

"Well, yes, as a matter of fact."

"Don't you think that's kind of weird?"

"I needed a Santa Claus," she said logically. "He agreed to help if I would come and tell you about the Magic Workshop."

He ran a hand through his tousled hair. "Well, I'm game if you are. What is Santa's Magic Workshop? Anything like a dollhouse?"

"Well, smaller than the one at Toyland."

"How much smaller?"

"Not even half as big—only one floor."

"Okay," he said encouragingly. "What's inside it?"

"Oh, the best stuff. The roof lifts off so you can play with all the things—a workbench, a fireplace with tiny logs, a comfy chair for Santa, a couple of elves, oh, and miniature toys that you can put together and paint—like a sled and a bicycle."

"It sounds nice." His eyes were warm on hers.

"Do you mean it? You really like the idea?"

"Of course I mean it. Now, don't get carried away," he warned. "This

doesn't mean we can produce it tomorrow."

"No, I understand. That's fine. Really." But she could hardly contain her excitement.

"We'll schedule a meeting before the board at Toyland and get a preliminary approval, then ask for a final okay once we have something to show them—you know, like a model of the Workshop."

"Okay, sure."

"And Kristina?"

"Yes?"

"I have a very good feeling about this."

She nodded slightly. "Me, too."

"Now which way to get out of here?"

"I don't exactly know," she said.

"No problem." He grinned. "I left a trail." And he pulled a tiny green pellet out of his pocket. "A trail of Tic Tacs."

Inside the ballroom doors, Tucker stopped. "Look," he said, pointing to a garland above the French doors. "It's mistletoe."

Her gaze followed. "That's not mistletoe. It's holly."

"Kristina? Tonight it's mistletoe."

And then he bent down, bringing his mouth softly against hers. It was a chaste, warm, sweet kiss, but the pressure of his lips was steady and strong, and she sighed with pure pleasure, tightening her arms around his neck and kissing him back.

"Uh-hem." The loud, throat-clearing noise came from behind Tucker. Kristina looked around him into her mother's disapproving frown.

"What can you be thinking of?" Bitsy mouthed at her daughter.

Kristina tried to signal Tucker, but it was too late.

Clearly interpreting her odd gestures as a desire to end the kiss, he straight-

ened. "What's wrong?" he asked. "Are you worrying about the Magic Workshop again?"

She considered kissing him again to stop the flow of words, but it was too late.

"I'll call a board meeting at Toyland as soon as I can manage it."

"Toyland? What is he talking about?"

As Bitsy stepped forward, snapping with hostility, Kristina began to feel dizzy.

"You had some crazy idea about winning their contest when you were in high school, didn't you? I hope this doesn't have anything to do with that, Kristina."

"Mother, I—"

As Bitsy lost her temper, her sophisticated veneer slipped away. "Your father was always sending things off to that place. He was so sure every single one of his asinine ideas would bring in millions." Her mouth twisted with bitterness. "Couldn't get a real job. No, he had to play with toys."

Kristina said nothing. Misery didn't require words.

Bitsy pressed her lips together in a rigid line. "You can't have anything to do with Toyland, Kristina. I forbid it."

"I don't think that's your decision, Mrs. Austin," Tucker said quietly. "My father ran Toyland, and his father before him." He stood firm. "There's nothing wrong with Toyland. I can understand if you have some problem with the toy business. I mean, I don't know your ex-husband, but—"

"How dare you?" Bitsy gasped. "I will not discuss my personal affairs with you. Please leave here immediately."

"I'll be happy to leave." His eyes were a dark, troubled blue when they met Kristina's. "I'd like to drive you

home, though. Is that all right? We'll take your car, and I can come back for mine." Tucker's smile coaxed her. "All that champagne..."

"All right," Kristina said. "Let's go, Tucker." She held her breath. "Good night, Mother."

"Kristina!" Bitsy choked out, but her daughter didn't listen.

"I'M SORRY." His words hung softly in the silent car. "I would have avoided mentioning Toyland if I'd known."

"It's not your fault. But my mother," she said slowly, "is furious with me. And Mom is married to Windy Austin, my boss. So not only have I alienated the woman who raised me and agonized over me, but I've also probably screwed up my job. And all over something as unreliable as Santa's Magic Workshop."

"Your mother will feel differently once she's had a chance to think about it." Speaking from his own frame of reference, he said, "She loves you. I'm sure she'll realize that this is the best thing—"

"Tucker, she hates my father with such venom I can't even believe it after all these years. She will never forgive me if I try to be a toy designer. It's like betraying her for him."

"Maybe it's time she got over it."

"She's not going to get over it."

He squeezed her hand. "Be glad that you're finally doing what you've wanted to do for so long. You've gotta go for it. Life's too short to leave loose ends."

"Okay, Tucker. You're starting to sound like Nick."

"Well, that's good, isn't it?"

"I wouldn't say it's *good* exactly. Different, maybe."

"Santa Claus-meets-English-butler—it's not a type you run across every day," he remarked. "I've got to meet this guy." He pulled the car into her driveway. "Why don't I come in and meet him right now?"

"It's late. I doubt he'll still be up."

"We can see, can't we? Anyway, you have to let me in long enough to call a cab."

Tucker followed her up the walk to the house, noting that a light had been left on in the window.

"Nice place," he said softly.

"Thank you."

She switched on two more lamps as she got inside the door.

"But no mistletoe," he said.

"Don't mention mistletoe too loud, or Nick will be stringing some up tomorrow."

"Good for Nick."

"Did I hear my name?"

The cheerful words came from behind them as Nick extended a hand.

"Tucker Bennett, I presume?" he asked.

As his hand was heartily pumped, Tucker offered, "Nice to meet you, Nick."

"Did you children enjoy yourselves this evening?" Nick prompted eagerly.

"Well..." they said in tandem.

"Sort of," Kristina finished. "First the good news. He likes the Workshop idea, Nick."

"Wonderful."

"But my mother overheard, and she's extremely upset."

Nick clucked his tongue. "Don't fret, my dear. I'm sure your mother will come around to your way of thinking once she's got used to the idea."

"I think you guys are related." She

shook her head, but she was smiling. "Are you members of the same team?"

Tucker and Nick exchanged glances. "No," they chorused. Tucker added, "But we're both right."

"Dandy," she grumbled.

"Kristina," Nick cut in. "When are you going to get your Christmas tree?"

"Nick—" she started to say.

"What have you got against Christmas trees?" Tucker interrupted.

Kristina said stiffly, "I don't like them. But it's really none of your business. Or yours, either," she told Nick.

"My dear child, I think you're over-tired. Why don't you go up to bed now? Don't worry," Nick added, "I'll stay with Mr. Bennett."

"Oh, no, that wouldn't be right," Kristina said.

"Kristina," Nick went on, "you have to work early in the morning, don't you?"

"But tomorrow's Saturday," Tucker said.

"I, uh, work on Saturday." She shrugged. "And I really am exhausted." She paused, chewing her lips, drawing Tucker's eyes, reminding him of the kiss they'd shared. "I hope you don't mind."

"Oh, but I do," he murmured.

"How about a hand of gin rummy while we await your taxi?"

"Gin rummy?" Tucker echoed woe-fully. It wasn't quite what he'd had in mind.

*

TUCKER HELD open the door to the boardroom, expecting Kristina to go on in. But before she could, Trey came bar-eling out.

"Kristina," he acknowledged. "Tucker, can I talk to you?"

"We're on our way into the meeting. Can it wait?"

"No," his brother replied. "It can't."

Tucker frowned. "Why don't you go on in and get set up?" he asked Kristina. "I'll be there in a few seconds."

"All right," she said softly. She took a deep breath, squared her shoulders and plunged through the doorway.

"There's nothing to smile about," Trey snapped. "The preliminary figures are not good, and you're going to have to do something about it."

"Are you two fighting again?" Tegan asked, running up. "At least I'm not late for the meeting. I haven't even made the coffee yet."

"That would be a disaster," Tucker managed a smile for his sister, who was in a dither as usual. "Why are you late?"

"This." She stuck a yellow envelope at him, clearly marked Telegram.

Tucker ripped it open. "It's from Dad." But he decided not to read it out loud.

What the hell is going on there?
Straighten things out with your
brother, or I will.

Love, Dad

"Great," Tucker mumbled. Narrow-
ing his gaze at Trey, he demanded,
"What exactly did you tell him?"

"The truth," Trey insisted.

"Or your version of it." Tucker felt
anger and humiliation rise up and burn
in his chest. "What in the hell did you
think you were doing?" he asked sav-
agely. "He's sick, Trey. He could have

another heart attack with you playing these kinds of games."

"Baloney," Trey scoffed, and Tegan interceded. "Come on, you guys," she said sternly. "Let's get our act together, okay?"

Tucker nodded curtly, but he was still fuming. "Just remember who's president of this company." Yanking open the door to the boardroom, he gestured for Tegan to pass, and then strode in ahead of his brother.

KRISTINA had had plenty of time to set up her illustrations, stack the notebooks with the details of her proposal neatly on the table and twiddle her thumbs, waiting for the Bennett portion of the Toyland board of directors.

The other two board members were present, chatting on the far side of the room. She smiled pleasantly at them, but figured she would wait to be formally introduced. If Tucker ever got there.

Finally Tegan came into the room, with Tucker and Trey close behind. All three of them looked tense and unhappy, and her heart sank.

Unclenching his jaw, Tucker announced, "Everyone—this is Kristina Castleberry. She has a proposal for us that I think you'll be very interested in."

He shuffled into one of the tall leather chairs and motioned to the others to take their seats.

"Kristina, you know Trey," he said. "And Tegan, of course.

"Frank Dundee is next to Tegan," he continued. "Frank heads up Production."

That left a vague, slender man, whom Tucker quickly introduced as Pete Carpenter, their "numbers" man.

"Ready to go?" Tucker asked, as the

others settled in and started to thumb through the folders in front of them.

"Santa's Magic Workshop," she began in a less-than-inspiring tone. Her stomach was doing flip-flops, and she was afraid she was going to throw up. "This is a toy for the discriminating child or the adult who never grows up. It's intended to be beautiful to look at, fun to play with and involve hours of quality time.

"Yes, it will be expensive," she admitted. "But it will be worth it, like the Victoria's Dollhouse and Lancelot's Castle sets that Toyland already markets."

Nods of agreement met her reference to two items in their current product line, and she felt more encouraged. *Maybe it's going okay*, she decided, and the words began to flow on their own with a little more enthusiasm and energy.

It was only when she came to the conclusion of her remarks some twenty minutes later that she realized she had no idea what she'd said or what they thought.

"Any questions?" she inquired.

"It's a rather complete proposal," Pete, the numbers man, added. "I'm sure we can find answers here if we need them."

"Are you ready to vote?" Trey asked. "I am."

"Well..." Pete said doubtfully.

Frank, head of Production, said, "There are a few things in here I'd like to go over if Ms. Castleberry doesn't mind excusing us for a couple of minutes."

"Not at all." She shifted her glance from face to face, but no one looked confused or otherwise in need of her ser-

vices. "Okay, well, I guess if that's all..."

"You can wait in my office," Tucker suggested. "I'll walk you down there."

He ushered her into his office and then turned to leave, but relented. "For what it's worth, you did a great job in there."

"OKAY, EVERYBODY. Good job," Tucker said. "And thanks."

He glanced at his watch, noting that only twenty minutes had elapsed since he'd left Kristina in his office.

Well, at least the meeting had gone smoothly, even if the rest of this rotten day had to be chalked up as a total loss. Tucker ambled down the corridor, his hands in his pockets, fingering the crumpled telegram.

"Hi," he said casually, angling his head around the door into his office.

She stood. "What's the news?"

"You got it," he said, a spark of triumph in his voice. "The board voted to approve the creation of a prototype of the Workshop. Once we see the genuine article, we'll decide whether to proceed into production."

Kristina said slowly, "So now I go ahead and create a prototype, right?"

He nodded.

She brightened so quickly that he was dazzled. "Thank you." She took a deep breath, clearly trying to contain her exuberance. "So now what?"

"Well, we set a date—to show the board your model. The earlier the better."

"Okay." She laughed again. "I can't wait. A real-life model of Santa's Magic Workshop. Well, it will take their breath away!"

AUSTIN'S WAS in the full euphoria of the Christmas season. The decorations were lush and beautiful, the music sweet and sentimental and thousands of shoppers were piling up debt on their Austin's credit cards.

Monday morning, ten days before Christmas, was no time to come in late, but Kristina had stayed up last night fussing with the chimney on the Magic Workshop.

As she raced down the hall in her tennis shoes, juggling coat, briefcase, purse, her secretary came running out of the office, frantically signaling her.

"Thank God!" Polly cried, as Kristina struggled to change shoes. "Windy, er, Mr. Austin, that is, and your mother have been calling for the past hour, for a meeting ASAP. I told them you were on the floor, but Windy is—"

"Okay," Kristina interrupted calmly. "Where are they? Windy's office? I'll get right up there."

"Oh, I almost forgot. I think Windy said it was about the display windows."

Of course it was about the big windows on Michigan Avenue. Where was her head? "I'll just grab the file and be on my way."

Kristina approached the big glass doors to Windy's inner sanctum with more than a hint of nerves.

"Come in," Windham Forbes Austin IV barked, and she forced herself to march in.

Windy was a small, slender man, always dressed to the nines, and yet always rumpled-looking somehow.

"Hello, dear," her mother murmured, in the quietly respectful tone she always used around Windy. Tastefully dressed in a pink cashmere suit, with just the perfect note of expensive perfume, Bitsy strolled over and brushed a kiss in the

general area of Kristina's cheek. "So busy, darling?"

Windy wasted no time on chitchat. "What's the meaning of those windows?"

"The Dickens windows, sir?"

"Exactly."

"Windy doesn't care for them, dear," her mother offered. "He thinks something more modern would be nice."

"I see." How did one diplomatically tell the president of one's company that he was being ridiculous? "I understand your feelings, Mr. Austin, but there are a few...complications. As I'm sure you're aware, we are featuring a Victorian Christmas theme storewide, and I'm afraid something more modern wouldn't really fit."

Windy glared at her, and her mother looked dismayed.

"We do our Christmas windows in three-year cycles," she explained. "The Dickens windows are on their last year...next year we'll have something you like. I'm sure, sir."

"Next year is a long way away."

"I wish I could help, Mr. Austin, but even if we redesigned the displays, we couldn't possibly get them together in the time left before Christmas," Windy grumbled.

"All right, then, we understand," Bitsy said brightly. "I'll walk you out, dear."

As soon as they'd cleared the doors, Bitsy demanded, "Where were you this morning? We were waiting for over an hour."

"Didn't Polly tell you I—"

"Darling, I know a secretary covering for her boss when I hear one." She pushed Kristina toward Windy's, outer office. "Not that it matters where you were," she continued. "What matters is

that you were not here when you should have been, and from what Windy says, you're neglecting your job."

"I am not!" she protested.

"Well, Windy says the other managers are complaining that you come in late and leave early, and that you pay no attention to matters that need to be taken care of."

"I had several doctor's appointments," Kristina quickly improvised. "But I was here all day Saturday, and part of Sunday, too."

Bitsy waved her hand negligently. "I know, I know. But darling, appearances are everything." She draped a small, cashmere-clad arm around her daughter. "Make sure you see Windy several times a day, just in passing, so *he* sees you looking busy."

"Yes, but..." She had to get the Workshop prototype finished by December 24.

"No buts, darling. You'll do as I tell you if you want to keep your job here."

"Yes, Mother."

SHE CONCENTRATED on work all day, and even though she felt like a slime, she made sure anyone who was anyone saw her acting busy and competent.

The floor manager in Children's put in a call just before three, and Kristina hustled down to see what the crisis was this time. She hoped it wasn't Nick.

"Some kid tried to get on the rocking horse with one of the singing teddy bears," the supervisor explained. "He fell off, and the mother said she'd sue. Do you think we should replace the horses with something else?"

"No," Kristina responded. "I don't. Why not set up some velvet ropes, like

the ones around Santa's area, to cordon off the displays?"

As she walked back to the elevator, she had to maneuver around the lines of children waiting to see Nick.

She smiled fondly. At least he had worked out. In fact, he was wonderful. At the moment, he was sitting in his velvet wing chair, wearing his dark maroon robe and holly wreath, chatting amiably with a small girl in a red taffeta dress.

"Checking up on Santa?" a deep, haughty voice asked at her elbow.

She glanced down to meet Mirabel Austin's beady eyes.

"Uh, yes," she said. "He seems to be working out rather well, don't you think?"

Mirabel sniffed and walked away.

"Thank you, Santa!" A girl wrapped her chubby arms around Nick's neck and gave him a big smack on the cheek before racing off to find her mother.

"Nick," Kristina whispered. "So you're in the business of making dreams come true, huh?"

He smiled wistfully. "There's nothing that makes me sadder than unrealized dreams."

"Me, either." She paused. "Nick, there's something I have to tell you about Santa's Magic Workshop—"

"Going great guns, I hope."

The hell with her job at Austin's if she couldn't let it slide long enough to do what she knew in her heart she had to do.

"Yes," she said brightly.

"Indeed." He motioned for the next child to come up, and Kristina waved goodbye.

She bypassed the elevators and took the stairs instead. Ignoring Polly and the handful of message slips she was wav-

ing, Kristina barged right into her office to dial the phone.

"Mother? I'm glad I caught you. It's Kristina. Can you have lunch with me tomorrow? There's something I need to talk to you about."

FOR THE ELEVENTH time she pulled out the list and went over it again.

Things to tell Mother:

1—Santa's Magic Workshop is important to me and I want to pursue it.

2—I know where my father is, and I want to contact him.

And then there was number 3. Tucker.

Kristina stuck the list in her lap as Bitsy breezed in and tossed her alligator bag on the empty chair at their table.

"Love this place." Bitsy picked up her lace-edged napkin. "I'm so glad they decided to redo it."

Bitsy said that every time they came to the Tea Room, Austin's delicate, feminine fourth-floor restaurant. Kristina had chosen it for their lunch with Bitsy's goodwill in mind.

Bitsy began to examine the pale lavender menu. "They're no longer offering the cucumber soup. Isn't that distressing?"

"Mother," Kristina said, strengthening her resolve, "I asked you to meet me for a reason. There's something I need to tell you."

Bitsy closed her menu. "It's that Tucker Bennett, isn't it? You're seeing him."

Blast it, anyway. Tucker was number three on the list! Things were out of order, and she hadn't even begun.

"Well, actually I haven't seen him

for..." She counted quickly. "Four days." It seemed a lot longer.

"So you've been lying to me."

"In my heart, Mother, I've been lying to both of us for years."

"Kristina, how could you?" Bitsy hissed, darting glances around to see if there was anyone she knew.

"Mother, we're getting sidetracked. This isn't about Tucker. It's about Daddy," she said flatly.

"What?" Bitsy choked. "Kristina! This isn't like you at all. I knew that horrid Bennett person would be a bad influence."

"Let's drop Tucker for now, okay? And start at the beginning. You remember the Toyland contest over ten years ago, right? I found out that they liked the idea I had entered. I went to Toyland and told them about it." She said softly, "That's when I met Tucker."

"Wonderful," Bitsy said sarcastically.

"Look, it isn't my fault that he left you!" she said passionately. "Now you know why I keep things from you—because you snipe at me and insult me. I hate it."

Her mother sat stiffly. "I beg your pardon."

"The Toyland people like my idea," Kristina declared. "They're going to decide if they want to market it."

"I'm still listening."

"It's important to me to know if it can be something. All my life I wanted to design toys." She swallowed. "You were right yesterday when you said I'd been taking time away from Austin's. I have. To work on my design. I know you don't want me to have anything to do with toys, because of Daddy. But I have to."

"Even if it breaks my heart?"

"Mother, this isn't fair."

"I don't care." Bitsy threw her napkin down. "I hate that man. I won't let you have anything to do with him."

"I know where he is."

"I knew it. You're going to see him, aren't you?"

"He's my father."

"And a terrific father he was, too," Bitsy sneered. "Where was he when you needed him?" She stood. "And now you're going to find him and stage a reunion. Well, go right ahead. But don't ask for my approval. I won't be there."

THE CAR DROVE itself to Toyland, where right inside the front door, she stumbled over Tegan. Tucker's younger sister looked even more frazzled than usual.

"Kristina, hi," she offered gloomily.

"Hello, Tegan. How are you?"

Heaving a heavy sigh, Tegan said, "Don't ask."

She started to walk past, but Kristina stopped her. "Look, Tegan, it's none of my business, but you don't seem very happy here."

"I hate it," Tegan announced. "Detest, abhor and despise it. I hate toys, and I hate Toyland."

Kristina was astonished. "So why don't you leave?"

"Because Tucker would kill me."

"No, he wouldn't." Kristina smiled, thinking of Tucker's lectures on deciding for yourself, doing what *you* want. "It's your decision, not his."

"You really think Tucker would be okay with it?"

Kristina nodded. She wasn't all that sure, but she had to put on a brave face for Tegan. The poor girl was miserable!

Tegan seemed to consider the idea for

a moment. Then she said, "I just may do it."

"Go for it, kid."

"Thanks, Kristina!" Tegan went skipping away with a positive spring in her step. She called back, "Oh, by the way, if you're looking for Tucker, he's upstairs in his apartment."

Behind a funny little door at the end of the hall, an equally funny little staircase led up to the fourth floor, where Tucker lived.

She hesitated in the narrow passage, deciding whether or not to knock, when Tucker's voice trapped her where she stood.

"Come in," he called out. "Door's open."

Like the first time she'd heard it, his voice sounded deep and rich. She remembered thinking then that it had the power to undress her, to physically touch her.

"Tucker?" She pushed the door open a few inches.

"Kristina?" He yanked it from the other side. "What are you doing here?"

"I need to talk to you," she said. "Can I come in?"

He stepped back. He seemed to be waiting for her to speak.

"I told my mother everything. Came clean, so to speak."

"That's great. I'm glad for you."

She shrugged. "Maybe. The jury's still out." She managed a wan smile. "But the Magic Workshop's not going so well. I thought maybe I could bring the pieces over to the playroom, if you wouldn't mind helping me put it together."

"Actually, I'd love to," he admitted. "I haven't had the chance to put something together from the bottom up since back in my Design days."

"And..."

His gaze was curious.

She took a deep breath and said, "I've decided I want to contact my father. Will you help me?"

"What can I do? Write the letter? Dial the phone?"

"Either," she admitted. "Or maybe just hold my hand?"

She recognized a spark of mischief in Tucker's eyes. "Hand-holding is available."

"Great," she said with heartfelt relief.

They sat down on a big blue couch, settling in with a whoosh of cushions. "So what are you going to say to him?"

"I don't know. Nothing seems appropriate for someone I haven't seen in almost twenty years."

"You could ask him about his toy designs," he suggested. "We know he's still doing those."

"Right." It all came back to toys, one way or the other. "You know, he might be more likely to come back if you asked him," she said suddenly. "A job with Toyland! Tucker, it's perfect!"

"You want me to offer him a job?" he asked slowly.

"Could you? For me? Maybe if he were here, under supervision, he'd improve."

Tucker carefully removed himself from the sofa. "Okay," he said tersely. "I'll hire him. But if he doesn't work out, he goes. Understood?"

She nodded eagerly.

Without another word, he hauled the phone into his lap.

"I'm calling for George Castleberry," he said into the receiver, and Kristina's heart stood still.

Tucker waited, and then he squeezed her hand.

"Mr. Castleberry? There's someone here who wants to talk to you."

Tucker handed her the phone.

She met his gaze, tried to be brave and failed.

"Hello, this is Kristina," she said quietly. There was only silence on the line, but she made herself say the rest. "Your daughter."

*

A GRAY-HAIRED man with a slight droop to his shoulders rose from the far end of the conference table. His eyes were dark under narrow brows, but he had the myopic squint of a person not quite of this world. The eyes of a dreamer, her mother had always said.

He stuck out a slender, time-worn hand. "You must be Kristina."

She took his hand, and shook it limply, wondering what she should feel and how she should behave. Fortunately Tucker was just outside.

"You don't look like your mother," he commented. "You're so tall, and your hair is dark."

"I, uh, never looked like her. I thought you'd remember that I took after you."

He shook his head, and for the first time, his eyes met hers. "I remember a little girl in pigtails who wanted to know how the toys worked. But it's all so long ago."

"How was your trip from Cleveland?" she asked.

"Fine," he responded. "And you? How are you?"

"Fine," she echoed. Lord, this was painful. "Are you settled in?"

"Oh, yes. Yes," he murmured. His eyes lit up, and he stood a little straighter. "I've always been a one-man

band, so to speak, so this notion of working for someone else is new to me, but the tools and the facilities here—well, it's fantastic."

"That's...good." Suddenly, she couldn't think of anything else to say. "Do you have a place to stay? I still have the old house, and you can stay with me if you'd like."

"Oh, no, that won't be necessary. I'm planning to find something out here, closer to Toyland."

"Right." She'd counted on some time at her house, where they could relax and get to know each other again. But maybe it was better this way. "Whatever suits you. I'll leave my number, so you can reach me."

"Kristina? I'm glad you arranged this."

"I'm glad, too." After a pause, she said, "I'm glad you're here, Dad."

And then she was out of that stuffy little room, and Tucker was holding her in the embrace she'd always wanted from her father.

"That bad?" he asked.

"No, it was okay. Awkward, you know, but it was bound to be." She put on a brave face. "It's just...new."

"Right."

SHE WAS getting better and better at putting her job on the back burner without experiencing guilt. What with the steady progress she and Tucker were making on Santa's Magic Workshop and her new preoccupation with reserving time for her father, she couldn't worry about Austin's or her own shaky future there.

"Too bad," she muttered as she let herself into Toyland's design department. "I deserve this time."

Peering over the divider into her fa-

ther's carrel, she saw the top of his head bent over a stack of papers. Déjà vu, she thought. There were drawings of odd vehicles pinned to the walls, and tons of crumpled-up paper around him in the cubicle.

"Hi, Dad," she said. "Ready to break for lunch?"

"Hmm? What's that?" He glanced up. "Oh, Kristina. Hello."

"Dad?" She tried again. "Lunch?"

"Lunch? Oh, no, I couldn't. Busy," he said.

"Dad," she prodded, "you have to eat."

"Oh, all right," he responded. "But not for long. I have to get back."

She took him to a Chinese restaurant.

"So, what looks good to you?" she asked brightly, determined to make it a nice lunch.

"Hmm? Oh, I don't care. Anything is fine."

He kept tapping a chopstick against his paper place mat, and then he started to whistle tunelessly.

"Dad," she prompted. "How are things going at Toyland?"

"They seem rather thick there to me," he said. "They wouldn't recognize real creativity if it jumped up and bit them."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Here, let me show you what I mean...." Pulling out a mechanical pencil, he began to sketch some sort of blob on his place mat. "You'll see how good this is," he muttered.

She couldn't believe what he was drawing. "Dad, that's Thor's Flying Hammer. You were working on that years ago."

"No, no, it's different," he asserted.

"Why don't you put the hammer aside for the moment?" she asked.

"Dad, I asked you to lunch so we could talk. I thought we could use the time to get to know each other again."

He blinked. "I'm, uh, not very good at that kind of thing."

"But, Daddy, couldn't you at least try?"

Managing a weak smile, he told her, "You wanted your old man to be 'Father Knows Best,' but all you got was George Castleberry. Not much, is it?"

"Please don't say that."

His dark eyes filled with dismay. "I never wanted to disappoint you, Krissie. But I don't know how to do anything else."

"You didn't disappoint me, Daddy, so let's try to cheer up here, all right?" She brushed at the tears threatening to swamp her. "We're both trying our best, and that's all we can do."

He nodded, but she knew his heart wasn't in it.

"Waiter," she called. "I think we're ready to order."

At least it filled the silence.

"Hi, Dad." Tucker pulled the phone over to the coffee table, setting it next to a roof section from Santa's Magic Workshop.

"Hello, son. Things going any better there?"

"Not really, Dad. I can handle it, but I'm not sure I want to. I think..."

"Yes?"

"I think it's crazy for me to stay in a job I hate."

"Well, I agree with you there. I'm just surprised to hear you say that."

"I've been working on a new design project," he said finally. "I miss being a designer."

"You always were a damn good designer, Tucker."

He didn't know quite what to say. "I've never been a quitter, Dad. You know that."

"It doesn't matter, Tucker. So you want to step down and go back to Design, huh?"

"That's the basic idea."

"But that leaves us with a big problem. Who's going to take the helm?"

"I don't know. Trey, maybe." He hated to even think it. "He's hungry enough."

"But he's not ready for it," his father said shrewdly.

"No," Tucker said. "He's not."

"Then who?"

"I don't know."

"Look, son," Harley Bennett declared, "I think it's time to cut this cruise short. It's driving me crazy, and your mother is getting weepy thinking about not being home for Christmas. We'll get the whole family together and hash it out. Deal?"

"Dad, if you shouldn't—"

"Don't start in on the heart attack. The doctor says I'm fine, and I feel great." And then, in a muffled voice, he announced, "Thelma—get packing. We're going home for Christmas."

WHEN SHE WANTED to see Tucker, Kristina knew where to find him. In the playroom, working diligently on Santa's Magic Workshop. Sometimes she thought he was more caught up in it than she was.

Feeling mischievous, she crept up behind him and slid her hands over his eyes. "Guess who," she commanded, in what she hoped was a low, sultry voice.

Instead of answering, he whipped

around on his stool, trapping her between his thighs and holding her there. Before she could say a word, he pulled her forward and hungrily covered her mouth with his own.

She moaned into the kiss, and the greedy sound of it was shocking to her ears. *Not me*, she thought, but she knew it was.

When she began to see stars, she knew she had to breathe or pass out, so she detached herself.

"That's some welcome."

The flames were still burning in his eyes as he rubbed a thumb down the curve of her cheek. "But every time we're together, all we do is slave over Santa's Magic Workshop. I thought maybe we could both use a diversion."

"But not for long." Regretfully, she broke away from him to gaze down at the bits and pieces on the table.

"There's a lot left to do," he told her, "and not much time."

"The meeting's not until ten tomorrow. I planned to pull an all-nighter if I had to."

Tucker raised an eyebrow. "I'm not sure even an all-nighter will do it. Before you got here, I was trying to figure out what we could afford to lose."

"We're not losing one thing!" she cried. "Let's get to it." She stripped off her jacket and rolled up her sleeves. "You start the lights right now, and I'll finish the rest of the miniatures."

"I'll start the lights, but you aren't doing anything dressed like that. Go upstairs and change your clothes," he said sternly.

Quickly she picked out a jersey, and a pair of sweatpants.

Since shoes were out of the question, she rummaged around till she found Tucker's socks.

Then she raced back to the playroom.

She came skating in, sliding in the too-big socks. Tucker wasn't there. But a large note taped to the center of the train set said, "Tucker—I quit. Tegan."

Kristina's heart dropped to her knees. Had he seen this yet?

The timing couldn't have been worse. She sagged to a stool and tried to figure out what she was going to tell Tucker, but all she managed to do was knock over a pile of Workshop props. As she bent under the table to pick them up, she heard voices.

"There's nothing I can do," Tucker argued.

Trey's voice followed. "But, Tucker, it's not fair to the others."

"Give it some time. If he doesn't get any better, we'll get rid of him. Okay?"

"What are you talking about?" Kristina inquired, easing herself out. She had the sinking feeling it was her father.

"Nothing," the brothers said in unison.

"What are you doing hiding under the table?" Tucker asked hastily. "And what's that?" He plucked at the note. "Tegan quit?" he sputtered. "She can't! Now we lose a vote on the board, and I'm not sure there are any to spare."

She framed his face with her hands, pulling him toward her, and whispered, "It's going to be so gorgeous, they'll have to vote for it."

"Okay," he murmured, dropping a soft kiss to her lips. "But if you start this..." He kissed her again. "We'll never get the model done."

"Food," Kristina moaned as she sewed the last piece of lace on Mrs. Claus's apron. "I need food. Good grief, Tucker, it's almost nine o'clock. Can we

stop long enough to get a pizza delivered?"

"Yeah, okay," he said. "Let me know when it's here. I almost have the flames in the fireplace working."

This was a fine how-do-you-do. He was the one toiling so hard he barely noticed her presence, and she was the one begging for breaks.

Too bad. She was starving. Shameless, she left him long enough to go down the hall to Design and use the phone to order pizza. Funny, her father's cubicle looked almost empty.

"He probably took stuff home to work on," she muttered, and then forgot about it.

When the pizza finally got there, Tucker managed to eat, but then it was back to work.

Dropping an arm over his shoulder, she tickled the edge of his jaw with one finger. "Oh, Tucker," She sighed. "It's so late, and I'm so tired..."

His hand ventured under her shirt, and his fingers began to play with the drawstring on the sweatpants.

"Oh, dear," she said breathlessly. "Tucker, if you keep this up, I may be forced to seduce you."

"Fire away," he said lazily.

"But the Workshop..."

"So we'll take a little break. You wanted a break."

She followed the line of his bottom lip with the tip of her finger. "But you didn't."

"I changed my mind," he said, and then he hauled her up off the stool, plastering her body next to his. She had no choice but to wrap her legs around his waist, and let herself be swept away.

How he maneuvered the stairs she'd never know.

"I want you," he whispered, kicking

the apartment door closed behind them. His voice was a soft, husky whisper, and it melted every nerve-ending in her body. "Kristina, I want you so much..." He paused. "Because I love you." Looking confused, a little bewildered perhaps, Tucker added, "I don't know how or why, but I fell in love with you before the first time I kissed you."

"Did you say you love me?"

"Yes." He clasped her hands in his and drew them up between them.

She swallowed. "I think I love you, too. But I'm afraid."

"I know."

"I think if we..." She moistened parched lips. "If we make love, I won't have a choice about loving you."

"There's already no choice."

Without another word, he carried her to his bed. And right there, Tucker set her down gently, and began to disrobe.

He slipped his black T-shirt over his head, revealing a long, beautiful torso—all sleek muscle and sinuous curves. And then his hands moved to the top snap of his jeans. Pop. And the zipper began to zag, tooth by tooth.

"Uh, maybe I'm not ready for this," she said in a funny, uneven voice, and she half sat up.

"What's wrong?" He stopped. "Is there something wrong with my body?"

"Oh, heavens, no," she whispered. "You're absolutely perfect."

He arched an eyebrow. "Wait till you see my birthmark." And then, still partially dressed at least, he slid into the bed next to her, wrapping her in his arms and finding her mouth with his.

Underneath him, she was melting. She forgot to be anxious or self-conscious. His hands, his mouth, his skin... She was consumed with him, and it had barely begun.

His mouth was hot and soft, moist, achingly sweet, and he opened it wider, making the kiss fuller, deeper. She moaned, a tiny pleasure-filled sigh, and tested his smooth shoulders under her palms. She liked the feel of him, so sleek and rangy. She couldn't get enough of him under her hands, and she slid them down his chest and up his back, exploring, claiming, pulling him nearer.

He nibbled her lips, unsettling her when he framed her face with his clever hands and brushed her lips with a series of small, chaste kisses. It made her restless, edgy; yet when he held back, slowing the pace even further, she felt it echo deep inside.

He cupped the roundness of her bottom through the thick, soft sweatpants, cradling her so close that her hand couldn't fit between them anymore.

Her eyelids fluttered as he moved against her, slowly, tantalizingly, with a rhythm she found fascinating. She was so tangled up in this bewitching dance, she barely noticed it when he bunched up her football jersey and tossed it aside.

Cool air drifted across her breasts and shoulders as they were bared to his eyes, and he trailed his lips and his hands across her passion-slick skin. Twisting tendrils of her long, dark hair around his fingers and across her body, he played the strands of her hair out like a web of black silk.

It was the most erotic thing she'd ever seen.

She wanted him with a primitive longing that jolted her, shamed her. Who was this wild woman, writhing under him, curling into him, pushing away his clothes, begging him to touch her?

"Don't stop," she murmured, as he edged away to discard the remnants of

their clothing. "But, oh, that feels wonderful, too," she whispered when he returned.

He refused to pick up his excruciating pace, caressing her, teasing her, barely grazing her with kisses, until she simply couldn't endure another instant.

His face was dark and dangerous, not at all the Tucker she knew.

She squeezed her eyes shut, past the point of no return. "What are you waiting for?" she asked.

"You," he said simply. And then he slipped inside her with a smooth stroke that took her beyond reason, beyond desire, beyond anything.

"Tucker," she breathed.

He moved inside her, against her. It was slow and sweet, steady. The cadence reined her in and set her free. Her body tightened and she arched off the bed, so near to blessed release she could taste it.

But he rolled over onto his back, breaking the rhythm, holding her steady and still with his hands riding her hips.

"Damn you," she swore, and thrust against him. "I had it. I was there, and you..."

And then, there it was. Soaring over the edge, she cried out with pure pleasure. And Tucker's low moan told her she'd brought him with her on the roller-coaster ride into oblivion.

No one moved for a long moment.

"I love you," he whispered into her ear, pulling her down onto his chest. "Kristina. I love you."

MORNING INTRUDED itself into Kristina's consciousness little by little. There were no windows in Tucker's bedroom nook, so the light of daybreak only

crawled in, as gray and gentle as spring fog.

"Tucker," she said as he rocked her back and forth gently above him, letting her feel through the thin sheet that he wanted her just as much this morning as he had last night. She began to tingle deep inside, ready for another round, even as long-unused parts of her body sent up warnings that they were a little sore, after last night's fun and games. "We said some things last night..." she ventured.

"Like 'I love you'?"

"Yeah. Like that." She knew she sounded far too solemn. "Did you mean it?"

Swiftly he flipped her over, trapping her neatly, and then he moved above her, rubbing against her in a very sensual, rather obvious motion. "Want me to prove it?"

"That's not how you prove it."

"How, then?"

She smiled. "You could tell me again."

"I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you."

His eyes shone and his arms tightened around her. She couldn't remember feeling happier. "I love you, too. I really do."

"Now can I prove it?" he asked slyly.

"I'm sure you'll think of something."

"I could kiss you like this," he improvised, brushing his lips against her collarbone. "Or like this." His mouth trailed lower. "Or this."

He was just tasting the soft flesh at the top mound of her breast, when she suddenly sat straight up.

"Oh, my God! The Workshop!" She grabbed him by the shoulders and cried,

"We didn't finish last night. Tucker, the Magic Workshop! What time is it?"

Scooting out from underneath him, she began pawing around in the scattered clothing at the foot of the bed.

"And why exactly did that occur to you at this moment?" he inquired, looking a little peeved.

"Oh, no, Tucker," she moaned, holding up her watch. "We're dead. It's after seven! We're supposed to show it at ten, and we didn't finish."

"Don't worry." He pulled out a pair of gym shorts and sweatshirt. "We'll go down right now and finish it."

But, as she slipped back into the jersey and sweatpants she'd worn last night, she was far from convinced.

"Why are you so negative?" Tucker demanded as they made their way downstairs.

"I'm being realistic," she said stubbornly, heading directly for the table where the unfinished Magic Workshop had sat last night. "Well, the outside looks good," she admitted. "Huh. I didn't think we'd gotten that far."

"I didn't, either," Tucker said slowly. "What gives?"

Gingerly Kristina lifted the roof to look inside. "Look!" she exclaimed. "The stove is together, and the cookie trays are in. And Mrs. Claus is sitting at the kitchen table, just like I wanted her. Tucker, everything is here! But who did it? I don't think Trey would have, do you?"

"Don't look at me. You know where I was."

Tucker lifted the Workshop by its new handle, testing it. "Great," he told her. They both saw a note lying on the table where the Workshop had been. Setting the Workshop aside, Tucker pounced on it.

Dear Kristina and Tucker,
I popped by to see how things were progressing, but found you absent. As the deadline loomed so very close, I took the liberty of finishing it off myself. Best of luck at the meeting.

Nick

Kristina let the note dangle from her fingers as she found Tucker's gaze. "But how? How did he even get in here, let alone do all the work that was left, all by himself?"

Tucker laughed. "Maybe he really is Santa Claus."

"Forget it, Tucker." She stretched up to kiss his cheek. "The important thing is that the Workshop is done. If I leave now I have just enough time to get home, take a shower, change my clothes and get back here for the presentation."

"I don't know," Tucker said. "That's cutting it awfully close."

"Well, if I'm a few minutes late, you can either stall, or start without me. I really wanted to wear my lucky red suit. Please?"

"Yeah, okay." He relented. "But no more than fifteen minutes late. Or they'll get restless, and I can't guarantee how well it will go."

"I'll be here!" She kissed him again. "I love you!"

"I love you, too." He blew her a kiss. "See you soon."

It was a cold, gloomy morning, overcast and drizzly, but it couldn't touch her good spirits. She hummed as she turned her key in the front door. But the door wasn't locked. "Nick?" she called out. It was after eight; he ought to have left for Austin's ages ago. "Nick, are you here?"

"No, Kristina. It's me." Her mother rose from the lemon-striped chair. "I've been trying to reach you since yesterday morning, but no one seemed to know where you were," Bitsy said stiffly. "A person named Nick let me in this morning. He said you'd be home eventually."

"Mother, can we discuss this later? I have to get ready. I have a meeting at ten."

She was halfway up the stairs when her mother's next words caught her.

"The meeting is at nine-thirty," Bitsy announced. "Windy and Mirabel are going to fire you."

Kristina shut her eyes. "Fire me?" she asked, incredulously.

"Oh, yes. However, I have convinced them to give you a chance to speak in your own defense. Nine-thirty."

"But I can't. I have to be at Toyland at ten."

Bitsy's pale blue eyes were cold with disbelief. "Then that's it? You're going to throw your job away?"

"I guess I don't have a choice."

"I've just given you a choice. Meet with Windy and Mirabel and ask for your job back!"

"I told you, I can't. I have to be at Toyland."

"Do you think your Magic Workshop will pay the bills?"

"No," she admitted finally. "The Workshop will probably never pay the bills."

"Then get dressed and come with me," Bitsy urged. "You can still save your job, Kristina."

"I suppose you're right."

"You bet I'm right. Get dressed." Her mother crossed slender arms over her chest. "I'll be waiting."

Damn, damn, damn, she repeated to herself, all the way to Austin's in her

mother's luxurious car, as the windshield wipers scraped against an icy gray rain.

In her heart, she was almost sure she had made the wrong choice. *But it will be okay*, she told herself. Tucker was Toyland's fair-haired boy. If he had to, he could present the Workshop without her, and everything would be fine.

She'd dash in and out of this meeting with Windy, reassure him, keep her job and get to Toyland before any damage was done.

And pigs could fly.

"Mr. Austin will see you in a moment," the receptionist announced.

"Could I use your phone, please?"

The receptionist turned her telephone around sourly, eavesdropping on Kristina's conversation.

"Yes," she said into the receiver. "This is Kristina Castleberry. Is Tucker Bennett there, please?"

"No; I'm sorry," came the reply. "He's in a meeting."

"The Santa's Magic Workshop meeting?"

"No, that meeting has been delayed. This meeting is an emergency, with Mr. Bennett, senior."

"Tucker's father?" Heavens, that was some emergency. He was supposed to be on a cruise ship. But at least *her* meeting had been set back.

"Yes, that's right. They expect to be in there for some time. Would you like to leave a message?"

"Tell him that I may be later than I'd hoped, but I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Yes, all right," the secretary told her before they hung up.

"You can go in now," the receptionist told Kristina.

With her fingers firmly crossed, she marched into Windy's inner sanctum.

As expected, Windy was holding court from behind his desk. And Mirabel, even tinier than her son, was fixed at his elbow like the palace guard, beady little eyes pointed right at Kristina.

"Mr. Austin. Mrs. Austin," Kristina said politely. "Thank you for giving me this opportunity to set the record straight."

"You're welcome," Mirabel returned severely. "Take a seat."

"How do you explain your absences?" Windy said flatly.

Kristina raised her chin. "I've been neglecting my job for the past few weeks. There have been things going on in my personal life that I think would have distracted anyone. But for the previous six months I was the best employee you could have asked for. I did a very good job."

"Yes, well," Windy hedged, trying to look stern.

"And I can do a good job again."

"I don't think so," Mirabel began, but Windy turned to her and whispered something. They continued with this heated, if restrained, conversation for several minutes.

They were still at it when the glass doors creaked open, and the second receptionist came striding in. "Kristina Castleberry?" she demanded.

Kristina stood, raising her hand. "Here."

"I have an urgent message for you from Trey. He says, 'Your father has disappeared. We've called the police.'"

"I have to call Trey," she whispered.

"Kristina," Mirabel called out. "If you leave now, it's the last time you turn your back on Austin's."

"My father is missing!" she said. "I can't think about Austin's right now."

"You're fired!" was the last thing she heard as she raced out and down the stairs to what had been her office. After what seemed like an eternity, Trey's familiar voice came on the line at Toyland.

"Kristina? Listen, don't get upset."

"What's going on, Trey? Where is he?"

"Well, we don't know. No one's seen him for over twenty-four hours. That's why we called the police. Missing person, you know."

"You did the right thing, Trey." Tears pressed at her eyelids.

"Don't worry, Kristina. I'm sure he's fine. We have no reason to think anything is wrong."

"Right, right." Except no one had seen him since Sunday. "It's so cold out," she whispered. "What if he's out there, hurt or something?"

"I'm sure he's not hurt," Trey said firmly. "He probably just took off, needed some space, you know."

"Is Tucker there?" she asked in a small voice.

"He and my father are in the middle of a meeting. I don't know exactly what it's about—I'm going in there myself in a few minutes—but I think it's pretty intense. Why don't you wait and talk to him later?"

"Sure." She hung up the phone, feeling drained and yet keyed up. What could she do? Where could her father be?

Her house. Maybe he'd gone to her house, or at least left a message. She'd go home and see.

But she'd come to Austin's in her mother's car, so, in the freezing rain, she

walked to the train station, catching the next commuter train.

And the weather kept getting worse. As she caught a cab home the skies darkened, and the freezing drizzle kept pouring.

Didn't anyone know it was almost Christmas? *There should be snow*, she thought. *Big, puffy flakes—not this depressing downpour of ice and slush.*

Her house was cold and dark. No Dad, and no message from him.

But inactivity was impossible. She changed her clothes, grabbing a sweater and a pair of corduroys, then hit the road.

She was driving in circles, in a loop past the house where her father had rented a room, past the bus station, the train station and Toyland. As she peered through her windshield, searching for some sign of her father, the day grew darker and more dismal, the driving conditions worse.

But she couldn't give up.

Every five minutes, it seemed, she'd pull into a gas station to try calling Tucker again. But the secretary kept telling her that he was still in a meeting. The same meeting, she wondered, or the one to present the model of the Workshop?

It was well into the afternoon, and surely they'd met and decided the fate of the Magic Workshop by now.

It was just another piece of bad news at this point. What difference did it make?

Finally she headed back home. She couldn't recall ever feeling lower in her life.

As she approached her house, she saw that the lights were on. *Maybe he's here waiting for me.*

She ran up the walk and tore open the door. "Daddy?" she called eagerly.

But it was only Nick. Wearing his dark green Holiday Courier outfit, he came down the stairs pushing his suitcase in front of him.

"Thank you for finishing the Magic Workshop," she offered quietly. "It was beautiful, Nick."

"Well, this is good news," he commented cheerfully. "I was afraid I might miss you, and I did want to hear about the Workshop, and to say goodbye."

"You're leaving? Nick, you can't!" she sobbed.

He embraced her awkwardly. "There, there, my dear, don't cry." He offered her a handkerchief. "I'm afraid I haven't any choice. It's past time to be on my way. I'm needed at home. So many parcels to get ready." He shook his head. "And they all have to be delivered tomorrow night."

"But, Nick, tomorrow night is Christmas Eve. Why would you have to deliver packages on Christmas Eve?" The answer occurred to her suddenly, and she gulped. "Nick, you're not really Santa Claus. It was only a job at the store."

"Kristina," he chided softly. "I never lied to you. I never said I wasn't Santa Claus."

"Nick, you're not Santa Claus," she persisted.

A flicker of mischief lit his eyes. "You'll see," he told her. "What is Christmas without believing?"

"What can I believe in, Nick? Tell me," she demanded.

"Why not believe in yourself? If your father is the worst kind of bounder... Which, I might add, he is," Nick stated firmly, "well, it simply isn't your fault."

"Thank you, Nick, for trying." She wiped her eyes. "But I don't believe in Christmas."

"Kristina, all those years, again and again, you asked me to bring your father back for Christmas. Your Christmas wish never varied, until the year you designed the Magic Workshop. Then you asked me to let you win the contest. I couldn't bring your father back, and I'm afraid I failed you with the contest, too. But this year I thought I could finally make it up." Nick's eyes were warm and soft. "Perhaps it was best left the way it was. My apologies, child."

"Nick, you're not Santa Claus."

But he gave her a quick kiss on the cheek and left.

"Wait a minute," she murmured. "How did he know what I wanted for Christmas? You don't suppose he really is...?" she asked out loud. "But he couldn't be."

She told herself to stop being silly, and picked up the phone to try Tucker again. Then the doorbell rang.

"Daddy?" She flung open the door, and Tucker stepped in, looking as though he'd been through the same wringer she had.

"Thank God," he told her. "You're all right." He pulled her into his arms and hugged her fiercely. "I was so worried when no one answered the phone."

"But the message machine..." She glanced over at it, where she'd left it switched to the Listen position, instead of Record. "Wasn't on," she finished. "Damn it. What if my dad tried to leave a message?"

"Well, I tried," Tucker said shortly.

"Look, I'm sorry," she offered. "I tried to reach you all day. They kept saying you were in a meeting."

"Two of them," he said grimly.

"So you had the Magic Workshop meeting without me."

He nodded, avoiding her eyes.

"Well? What did they say?"

"I don't want to talk about it," he mumbled, sinking into one of her love seats.

Her heart sank. "That bad, huh?"

"Look, where were you?" he asked suddenly. "I kept expecting you to show up for the meeting. I called Austin's, and they said you no longer worked there."

"But you knew about my father, right?"

"Eventually. When Trey decided to tell me."

"Well, that's where I was," she told him. "After I heard about my father, I had to look for him."

"Look for him?" He raised an eyebrow. "Where?"

"I don't know. I just drove around."

"Kristina, you and I both know where he is. He was having a hard time at Toyland, and he took off. Just like when you were a kid."

She swallowed. "Maybe."

"Why won't you admit it?"

"Why are you being so ugly about this?"

"Because I want to know why you were looking for him when you should have been at Toyland!"

"Oh, so they turned the Workshop down flat, and you're blaming me for not being there?"

"They didn't turn it down flat."

"They didn't?" She came in closer.

Settling his head back, Tucker stared at the ceiling. "I was the only one who voted for it. Everybody else thought it was too expensive to undertake."

"Goodbye Santa's Magic Work-

shop," she said softly. "But it was beautiful, Tucker."

"Oh, they wanted to play with it, just not produce it." He added, "But then my father got into the thick of things. He offered a compromise. Make it smaller, make it plastic, sell all the accessories separately. That's it in a nutshell."

"Plastic?" she echoed, horrified. "I hope you told him *no* right then and there."

"How could I? I had to run it by you first. And you weren't there," he reminded her grimly.

"But you know how I feel about that Workshop!"

"I did the best I could. Besides, I stepped down today as president."

"You stepped down? But why?" She was horrified. "Does this have anything to do with your father coming back to town? Your secretary said you were in a meeting with him."

"The first meeting." Impatient, he stood and paced in front of her fireplace. "But hey, this was my idea. I told him about a week ago that I wasn't cut out to run the place."

Kristina was stunned. "You decided this a week ago...and this is the first I've heard of it."

"Dad and I had to square it away first."

"No, you didn't," she argued, focusing on him. "You could have told me."

She threw up her hands. "You're facing a major decision, and you don't bother to tell me. And on the other side, I got fired today, Nick left and my father pulled a disappearing act."

"You got fired?"

"Yes."

"And Nick left? I'm sorry, Krissie."

His voice was low and gruff, and he moved to put his arms around her. "I'm really sorry."

Refusing to be consoled, she pushed him away.

"I said I was sorry."

"I don't want you to be sorry. I want you to turn back the clock." The burning in her eyes and her throat was back, and she pressed two fingers to the bridge of her nose, hoping to hold the tears at bay.

"So what are you saying?" he asked slowly.

She swallowed hard. "I want you to go away."

"You don't mean that."

"Yes," she said. "I do."

"Well, I'm not going to walk out when we should be fixing this."

"There's nothing to fix," she said.

"If you won't leave, I will."

And then she grabbed her car keys and left him standing in the middle of her living room.

*

"GREAT," she snarled, turning the radio off so viciously it fell over the side of the kitchen counter. The unfortunate fact that it was Christmas Eve had not escaped her. Already, two clumps of carolers had come knocking at the door.

"I always did hate Christmas Eve," she muttered as she scoured out the sink. She stopped abruptly. Was it odd to be talking to herself while she cleaned the kitchen—on Christmas Eve?

"I don't have anything better to do." Besides, it was the ugliest Christmas Eve she'd ever seen—a perfect day to wallow in her sweat suit and eat powdered sugar doughnuts.

The doorbell rang and she ambled

through the living room, fully expecting more carolers.

But when she opened the door, Bitsy Austin stepped in.

"If you're here to yell at me about screwing up at Austin's don't bother." Kristina shut the door quietly. "You were right, and I was wrong. Okay?"

"I'm not here to talk about Austin's," Bitsy offered. "I have a message from your father, though why he chose to call me I'll never know. 'It just occurred to me,' he said, 'someone should tell Kristina I left.'" A hollow laugh escaped her. "Can you imagine? It only now crossed his mind that you might be worried."

"Did he say why he left?"

Bitsy rolled her eyes. "Does he need a reason? Oh, he mumbled something about the pressure, that they didn't like his designs at Toyland. He said he felt like you expected too much of him." She shrugged.

"Do you think he realizes that both times he left, it was at Christmas?" She laughed cynically.

"Darling, look—" Bitsy started, but Kristina waved her off.

"Go ahead, Mother, say 'I told you so.'"

Bitsy held herself very tightly. "I know it probably seems that way to you, but I never wanted it to turn out this way. I didn't want him to hurt you again."

Kristina said nothing. She felt dead.

"He's not a bad person, Kristina. He's just never been good with people."

"You're defending him?"

"No. He's weak and irresponsible, and so self-centered it still makes me furious. But hating him doesn't do any good. Take my word for it." She reached forward to smooth a wayward

strand of her daughter's hair. "I'm so sorry, Kristina. I wish I could make it go away."

"You can't, Mother. I should've known better, that's all." She crossed her arms over her chest. "I should've known that men can't be trusted."

"Hmm..." Bitsy examined her daughter's expression. "Are we including Tucker Bennett?"

"He's the worst," she mumbled.

Her mother sighed. "I was afraid this would happen." Kristina was mystified, but her mother went on, "After your father left, I kept testing the men I dated, and they kept coming up short, because I kept expecting them to let me down." She shook her head. "And if you look hard enough, every single person on this earth will let you down, because sometimes they can't be what you want them to be."

"I don't want to be let down anymore. It hurts too much."

"But that's life!" Bitsy took her daughter's hands in hers. "You can't make him into something he's not. He's only human, darling."

"I can't think about this right now." Kristina squared her shoulders. "I made up my mind, and that's it."

"Think about it, darling. If you love him, and he loves you, you'll be able to find an answer. In the meantime," Bitsy ventured, "I hope you'll forgive me."

"For what?" Kristina asked in surprise.

"I feel that perhaps I pushed you into working at Austin's, when maybe you would have been happier with this toy thing," her mother said tentatively. "I guess, hearing your father's voice again, I realized that I didn't hate him anymore. And I felt ashamed of myself, for holding on to you too tightly."

"I don't know what to say."

"Say you'll forget that I thought more about what I wanted for you than what you wanted." Bitsy squeezed her daughter's hand. "And that you'll think about forgiving Tucker. Trying to bind someone to you—well, it chokes them, and it doesn't do a thing for you."

"It's okay, Mother. Really."

"I'm really sorry about what happened at Austin's. But, Kristina, you do still need me, don't you? Just a little?"

"Of course, Mother."

"I can't stand the idea that there might be this gulf between us, now, of all times." There were tears in her eyes.

Kristina put her arms around her mother's slender shoulders, hugging her gently. "Everything's fine, Mama. Everything is just fine."

The doorbell rang again, and they broke apart, both brushing at their eyes.

Smiling wanly, Bitsy went to the door. "Oh," she said. "It's Mr. Bennett. Should I, uh...?"

"Mr. Bennett? Tucker?"

"Well, yes."

Tucker didn't give her time to decide if she wanted to see him or not; he just barged. And then he stood there, staring at her, with those blue, blue eyes.

"Excuse me," Bitsy said. "Perhaps I'd better be going."

"Mother, you don't have to leave. Tucker's not staying."

"Yes," he said firmly, "I am."

"I'm on my way," her mother promised. "I'll just let myself out. Will I see you for Christmas dinner? Oh, no, I guess you wouldn't want to...at the Austins' and all."

"She can't," Tucker said quietly. "She's going to have Christmas dinner at my house."

"I am not!"

"Bye," Bitsy called, slipping out the front door.

"How dare you force your way in here and push my mother out?"

"I didn't make her leave," Implacable, Tucker stood there watching her.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

He advanced on her. "Like what?"

She retreated. "Like...that." As she backed up, she hit something solid, and she sort of fell over the padded arm of the love seat.

He offered a hand to help her to her feet, and she hesitated, wondering if she dared touch him. But he yanked her to her feet, pulling her off balance so that she had no choice but to grab on to him for support. "I knew I shouldn't trust you," she whispered. But it felt so good, with his arms around her, holding her steady, with his hard, wonderful body pressed up next to her.

"I stayed away a whole day." His eyes were soft as he gazed down at her. "It was the best I could do."

Reluctantly, she pulled away from his embrace. "I told you I didn't want to see you anymore."

"Well, actually, you told me to go away."

"You knew what I meant."

He smiled. "But I didn't believe you."

"I don't know why you came. Nothing has changed."

"I love you."

She closed her eyes, but it didn't block out the sound of that husky, wicked voice. "I love you, and I'm not giving up."

"Tucker, please—"

"I'm not your father."

"Why did you say that?"

"Because that's the real problem,

isn't it?" He traced the curve of her cheek with his thumb. "You think I'll leave you. But I won't."

"No, that's not it," she insisted.

He nodded. "I was wrong not to tell you about the presidency. My pride got in the way, and I took it out on you, and I'm sorry. It's hard for me...to get used to making mistakes, to realize that it's okay. I hate like hell when I screw up."

"You didn't screw up," she told him honestly. "You just didn't like it. Those are different things."

"I'm working on it." When his eyes met hers, they had regained some of their spark. "So, is my apology accepted?"

"I understand how you feel, but that doesn't change—"

"Look, Kristina," he said, clearly at the end of his patience. "I'm sorry that I encouraged you to find your father, that I had a part in him hurting you again. But I'm not sorry that you fell in love with me, or that we made the Magic Workshop together. I loved it! And I love you, and that's not going to go away."

"I don't want to love you!" she cried.

"I don't want to love anyone."

"It's too late." His eyes met hers. "You already do."

"I know," she said miserably.

"Kristina," he ordered. "Look at me. I love you. I will always love you. I won't leave you."

When she found her voice, it was barely a whisper. "Do you mean that?"

"Yes," he breathed. "Oh, yes."

Her arms reached out for him before she knew what she'd decided.

"Listen, sweetheart," he told her, framing her face in his big hands, and grazing her lips with his own. "If you want the Magic Workshop the way it is,

then we'll keep bringing it in front of the board at Toyland until they have to agree. Or we'll take it to another company."

Something new occurred to her. "If you stepped down as president, do you have a job? Or are we both dusting off our résumés?"

"I'm back in Design," he said with a grin, "where I belong."

"That's great," she said.

"And since you no longer work at Austin's, I could hire you in Design if I wanted to."

It was a nice offer, but... "I don't think so," she demurred. "I only had the one idea, and it hasn't gone too far. No, I think I'm a born administrator—lists and pie charts and stamping out fires. So I'll just have to find another job."

He draped an arm around her, leading her to the white sofa near the fireplace. "There still might be a place for you at Toyland. My dad wants to be back in charge, but he needs help—someone who makes lists and pie charts and stamps out fires." He bounced down on her couch, and smiled up at her. "Who knows? When Dad retires for real, you could be the next president of Toyland."

"Oh, Tucker," she chastised as he pulled her down into his lap. "Get serious."

"I am serious. Of course, Toyland presidents have to be Bennetts."

"That lets me out."

"Not necessarily." He dumped her off his lap and then followed her down into the cushions of the couch. "You could marry me," he murmured in her ear.

"Quit joking around."

"I've never been more serious in my life."

"Okay," she said primly. "Then I say yes."

He lifted his body a little. "Really? Yes?"

She laughed out loud. "You look scared, Bennett. Better run while you can."

"I'm not going anywhere." His mouth came down on hers, hot and hard. "I'm planning on staying right here for a long, long time."

And then he kissed her again, until she would've said yes to anything.

"Merry Christmas," she whispered.

"Christmas," he said, and sat up abruptly. "I forgot. I brought you a present." And with that, he bounded out the front door.

A few seconds later she heard an odd scraping noise coming up the walk, and she peered out. "It's snowing! Oh, Tucker, look! The fat, fluffy kind."

"Yeah, it's great," he said. "So, what do you think?" He held up her Christmas present for inspection.

"I don't want a..." she started to say, but then she saw the look on his face, and realized she'd never had a better gift. "It's the best Christmas tree I've ever seen. It is, in fact, gorgeous."

As she helped him drag it over to the corner by the stairs, the place Nick had picked out, she couldn't keep the smile off her face. "Absolutely gorgeous." It was a scraggly little thing, but it was beautiful in her eyes.

"And I have a whole bag of ornaments and lights that my mom sent along," he told her.

"Your mom? I forgot—you have a mom and a dad. And now I have to meet them. I don't know if I can handle this," she said. "Families and eggnog and Christmas ornaments handed down through the generations."

"Yeah," he said happily, grabbing her and lifting her in the air for another kiss. "Tomorrow we can tell them we're getting married. But tonight is Christmas Eve for you and me, so we can wake up together on our first Christmas."

Christmas morning with Tucker. Christmas dinner with a real family. This was going to take some getting used to.

"Merry Christmas," she said, laughing down at him as a tiny, tinny noise rang out from the fireplace. Puzzled, she cocked her head in that direction.

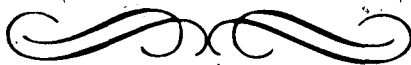
"Tucker, I could swear I hear sleigh bells in the fireplace."

"Nick?"

"But that would mean..."

They looked at each other for a long pause. "Naaah," they said in unison.

And then Kristina laughed. Gazing into the true blue of Tucker's eyes, she declared, "Maybe, just maybe...I do believe in Christmas."

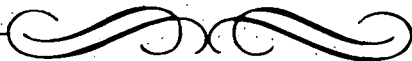




**LAURIE
PAIGE**
**Gypsy
Enchantment**



After a passionate summer affair, Keri Thomas had left Louisiana and Reid Beausan to begin her life again in Houston. But on her return, the man she couldn't forget seduced her again. Could this time around lead to forever?



The rain beat relentlessly against the windshield as the Porsche pushed east on the interstate that would take Keri Thomas to New Orleans.

At the next exit, she pulled onto the ramp, cruising over to a truck stop. She parked, and battling the weather, raced inside the restaurant.

"Hi. Wet out there, isn't it?" the waitress said as Keri selected a booth and slid into the seat. The girl looked about ten years younger than her own twenty-eight years and wore jeans and running shoes.

"Looks like it's getting worse," Keri commented with a smile as she accepted the menu. Her chic pantsuit was a designer model.

"Yeah, the twelve-o'clock news said the storm's eye will hit land late this evening." She left to get a glass of water.

Keri watched the waitress move across the tiled floor. When she had been eighteen, Keri had worked in a restaurant...an elegant place. That was where she had met Reid Beausan. He had brought his dates in for elaborate meals—until he had noticed her. Then he had come in alone several times to talk to her and gain her trust before asking to drive her home. She should never have accepted, but at eighteen, what does one know?

Thirty minutes later, she was on the road again. Worriedly, she surveyed the darkening sky and righted the drift of the car as the wind pushed at it.

Her thoughts reverted to the past. After taking her home that first time, Reid

had come to the restaurant almost every night. Waiting patiently with that smoldering, impatient look in his aquamarine eyes, he would take her to his expensive car, but the time that she arrived home became later and later.

For a second, the mists of the past cleared, and she was facing Reid, a haggard, impatient-looking Reid, who said, "What are you doing here? I don't have time for you now."

In the tragedy of his father's death, she had gone to him...to offer comfort, to share his grief...but he hadn't wanted her.

She had left his house, humiliated, knowing without a doubt that she was merely a pastime for him, a plaything to be picked up when it was convenient...for him.

"I'll call you," he had said. They were his last words to her, for she had gone to her bleak apartment, packed her clothes and headed west, never looking back.

The wheel was nearly wrenched from her hands, bringing her attention back to the slippery road. There was very little traffic—only an idiot would be out in this.

The Porsche veered sharply and she swung the wheel to correct the motion. A large dog came running across the grass and up on her side of the road.

Reacting instinctively, Keri swerved hard right. She felt the tires on that side drop off the edge of the pavement, moving out of control. The vehicle careened down the grassy bank and across a shallow drainage ditch. There was a rush of

fence and then a forest of trees coming at her.

Keri covered her face with her arms. She felt the pain in her head first; it moved to her shoulder and then her chest. A burning, tearing pain that made it impossible to breathe.

When she came to, several dim figures moved across her vision. The rain struck her face. She raised a hand to hold it off and groaned.

"Reid," she whimpered. "Reid."

"We'll get you out soon," a masculine voice said.

She passed out as they extracted her from the wreckage.

Later, she was aware of white and green figures floating around. A hospital, she realized.

She lifted a hand and it was taken into a warm clasp.

"What day is this?" she asked.

"Sunday," he answered.

She had loved Reid's voice from the first moment she had heard it. It was a deep bass voice, which held all the serenity in the world in its smooth tones. Now her dark eyes explored his face, comparing her vivid memory of him with what she saw.

His jawline was strong, almost cruel in repose. She once told him he could play a heavy on TV if he ever needed a job. He had punished her laughter by rubbing the rasp of beard that he always had against the tender skin of her abdomen before they made love.

A sharp contraction twisted her insides as she recalled his lips on hers, on her throat, coaxingly gentle on her breasts that had known no man's touch before his.

"What is it?" Reid asked, sensing her unrest.

"I hurt." Her hand went to her pounding head.

"You have a concussion. Rest. Things will be better soon." His lips, so firm but so sweetly enticing, touched the corner of her mouth. "My word of honor." And, as she drifted into sleep, he smiled at her as if he knew a wonderful secret.

To the man standing beside her, she looked fragile, close to death with her pale face and lips. Her wild gypsy hair was in a tumble on the pillow, one swatch cut away from the wound in her scalp.

Her lung had been punctured and she had almost died.

Reid had heard her name on the radio in the accident report. She had apparently been going seventy or eighty when she went off the road, and he wondered where she was going and why so fast. What had her life been like these past ten years? Who had lived it with her? She wore no wedding ring. For a second his strong jaw tensed at the idea of her with another man. Then he turned and quietly left the room.

On Tuesday Keri was moved from the intensive care unit to a private room. She watched the nurse bustling around, getting her settled.

A knock on the door heralded the delivery of a basket of flowers. "Oh, my, now isn't that pretty!" Mrs. Baker cleared a space on the night table and placed the bouquet there, handing the card to Keri.

"I'll bet it's from the young man who's been hanging around, asking a hundred questions about your health since you were brought in," she said, beaming.

Inside the card was only an initial—
R.

"Yes, it's from Reid," Keri murmured. Gazing at the flowers, she was carried back in time. White spider mums, big yellow mums and glorious bronze mums made up the arrangement. Did he remember, after all these years, that these were her favorite?

Feeling eyes on her, she glanced toward the door. Reid stood there with her suitcase in one hand and a basket of fruit and small cans of juice in the other. A box of candy was tucked under his arm.

He checked the room and then came around the bed to place the fruit and candy on her table.

"Do you like your room?" he asked.

"If I didn't, would you have it changed?"

"Naturally." He focused on her attire. "You have a very pretty nightgown in your case. Would you like to put it on?" His grin was seductive. "I'll be glad to help."

She tried to decide quickly on her position. He expected her to say no, but modesty seemed somewhat ridiculous in the light of their past association.

With a low laugh, he rummaged through the bag, coming up with the gold satin gown trimmed in bronze lace and the matching peignoir.

At her slight frown, he said, "Don't be shy, gypsy. I've had enough of looking at you in that rag you're wearing."

He handed her the gown and turned his back while she stripped out of the hospital sack and slipped into her own outfit.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

Her smile brought a dimple into play in each cheek. Touching the bandage beneath her gown, she told him she was fine. "Except it hurts when I breathe deeply."

He sat down by the bed. "Your lung was punctured. Just missed your heart."

"I'll have a scar?" she asked, fingering the spot above her left breast.

"It won't bother me," he assured her. "Don't talk. You're supposed to rest a lot."

Settling back against the pillows, she let herself enjoy the sight of his masculinity without dwelling on what it did to her to have him close like this...and in her bed!

"I had an appointment—"

"I saw it in your purse, which I have, by the way. I called the guy in New Orleans, but I'm afraid the property has already been leased by someone else."

"Oh, well," she said. "Something else will turn up."

"I did some prying into your affairs," he said.

"What did you find out?" She was amused at his apologetic attitude. It was unusual for him.

"You're quite an entrepreneur. You've been busy these past ten years."

It was his first reference to the time that had elapsed since they had last met. Only the use of his pet name for her, "gypsy," and the command for her not to be shy had indicated their past association.

She nodded without answering, beginning to feel weary.

Reid stood. "I've contacted your insurance company. The Porsche was totaled. I also talked to your office in Houston a couple of times. Your attorney is readying a report for you. Seems to be some trouble brewing. He wouldn't explain it to me, violation of confidence, I think." He waved a hand to show that he understood.

"Yes, thank you. For everything." She dredged up a smile. "You don't

have to come anymore, Reid. I can take care of things now. You probably have a jealous wife at home," she joked.

He shook his head. "No wife, past or present." His eyes narrowed. "I once let a good thing get away from me. I won't let that happen again."

He bent to her.

It was a brief kiss, but filled with promise. She squeezed her eyes shut, feeling weak and helpless.

"I'll see you later," he said and was gone.

Reid kept his word. He came to see her every day, bringing her a gift each time in spite of her protests. She improved rapidly, until finally the doctor agreed to release her the day before Thanksgiving.

Reid, with the surgeon's support, insisted that she couldn't go back to Houston yet. She was still weak, they argued; she could easily get pneumonia if she became fatigued.

"I'm not letting you go," Reid said in private after her stormy battle with him and Dr. Denney.

"What do you mean?"

"You need to be near the hospital, just in case. And—" he leaned over her to gaze solemnly into her eyes "—I need to know you're all right. I'd go out of my mind with worry if you went back to Texas."

"Perhaps I should stay close," she began. "An apartment..."

"No," he said. "You can't stay alone. At my house there'll be people to watch after you while I'm at work."

"I don't need to be looked after," she told him angrily.

"Yes, you do," he contradicted her, and sat on the side of the bed, his thigh resting against the curve of her hip,

bringing warmth and a strange, glowing comfort by its hard, male presence.

Sighing, she accepted the inevitable. "All right, I'll stay with you...."

He lifted her in his arms and sat in the one large, comfortable chair in the room and cuddled her close. The bony ridge of his nose frankly nuzzled along her neck as he strung kisses on her throat. He inhaled deeply.

"You smell so good," he groaned. "I've wanted to taste, smell and touch you ever since I walked into this hospital and saw that it was really you."

Lifting his dark head, he pierced her with his gaze and she felt her coldness dissolving. "Do you have any idea of the agony I went through following that announcement on the radio?" he demanded.

"Reid," she began, "why are you doing this? There's nothing deader than an old love affair. Let it go," she ordered sharply.

He placed hot kisses along her cheek, her temple, on her eyelids and down her nose, searching for her mouth. "No, gypsy, it's not dead. We weren't through with each other before...."

She strained from his seeking lips, her resistance slipping with each breath she drew. "Yes, we were," she insisted. "I'll only go home with you...if—" she steadied her shaky voice "—if you promise to leave me alone."

His smile was tender, gentle and somehow understanding. He carried her back to the bed. "I'll be careful with you," he said.

After he left, she considered her capitulation. She would spend Thanksgiving at his house. Then she would go home.

On Wednesday, promptly at ten, Reid came for her, tossing a package in her

lap. Inside was a pantsuit identical to the one she had been wearing when she had the wreck.

"How...how did you..."

"I called, described what I wanted and told them the size from the old one and they sent it out to me," he explained.

He was like a small boy with a present for his mother, she thought, resenting his intrusion into her life. He took it for granted that she would accept his present.

"Please," he said, reading her thoughts.

"Thank you," she returned ungraciously.

Mrs. Baker bustled in. "Need some help? My, isn't that pretty." She spotted Keri's clothes. Holding the door, she cast an inquiring eye on Reid, who retreated to the hall.

With quick, sure movements, Mrs. Baker helped Keri into underclothes and then the attractive, expensive outfit.

The nurse looked over her papers. "Keri." She read the name aloud. "That's so pretty. Do you know what it means?"

Keri shook her head.

"Keri means 'homeward bound.' It's a gypsy word. 'Ker' is gypsy for 'home,' you know."

AT BREAKFAST on Thanksgiving morning, Reid told her of the day's plans.

"Two holiday meals," he said. "One at noon at Aunt Hester's, the other at seven this evening at Aunt Amy's place. In between, I'm bringing you home for an afternoon nap."

"Why don't you have one big meal in the middle of the afternoon here?

That way, everyone could come at once." Keri stared at her host.

She had slept late this morning because they had sat up late last night, catching up on each other's lives in a superficial, hit-the-high-points manner. Both had been reticent in discussing deeper feelings.

That was just as well, she thought. Keep it light.

"It's not a matter of everyone coming at once. There's only my two aunts. Neither one has children or other family."

"Well?" she asked.

"Aunt Amy doesn't talk to Aunt Hester. That is, not ordinarily. They had a falling-out years and years ago."

She spread strawberry jam on a toast slice.

An hour later, Keri was dressed in a soft knit of deep burnt orange that enhanced her natural coloring. She looked fit, with no trace of her accident visible in her sparkling demeanor.

A knock sounded on her door.

"Are you ready?" Reid called.

"Coming." She opened the door and slipped her hand through his arm, allowing him to escort her to the waiting car.

She had decided to enjoy this long weekend and return to her home in Houston on Monday. Once they were on their way, she plunged into the breakfast conversation again. "Tell me about your relatives."

"Aunt Amy is sixty-four, Aunt Hester is fifty-nine. I think. Anyway, about forty years ago, Amy brought home a new beau. It seems he took one look at Hester and was smitten. Hester thought he was pretty nifty, too. They eloped a week later."

"Poor Amy," she commiserated.

"Yes, she hasn't forgiven her

younger sister yet. And she didn't marry."

"So what happened to the beau?"

"He and Hester had a happy life in Baton Rouge. He died almost seven years ago. They had no children, so Hester moved back to Beausanville about a year later. Now she does volunteer work."

"What about Amy?"

"Amy's a lot like you. She opened her own office, and now she wheels and deals in real estate. She's done quite well for herself."

"I hope Aunt Hester has plenty of turkey. I'm starving," she said.

When they arrived at the neat brick house, they were greeted by a tall, vivacious lady who wasn't at all what Keri had expected.

With a name like Hester, Keri had pictured a small, ultrafeminine woman who was kind of sweet and old-fashioned. Reid introduced her to a modern female dressed in a black pantsuit with a long-sleeved white blouse printed with black plumes.

Her dark hair was mostly gray, and it was cut in a short feathery style that complemented her lively manner. She kissed Keri on each cheek.

"I'm very happy to meet you, Mrs...."

"Aunt Hester, dear. Or just Hester, if you prefer," she said airily, her black jet earrings swinging wildly. "Come into the living room. I have a relish tray prepared. Dinner will be in about an hour."

Waving them into the other room, she continued talking while Reid did the honors with small glasses of sherry for each of them.

The young couple enjoyed a steady spate of local gossip during the delicious

meal that had all the traditional fixings cooked to perfection.

They had coffee in the living room after Reid had washed the dishes.

"Drink up," Reid broke into her mental images. "Keri has to take a nap before we go to Amy's tonight for her dinner," he said easily.

"Yes, she mustn't overdo it." Hester walked them to the door and kissed them both goodbye affectionately.

Keri settled into the comfortable seat. "Ahh, that was nice. Thanks for taking me." She stifled a yawn.

As he pulled onto the deserted street, Reid asked, "Who do you usually spend holidays with?"

"Sometimes with my secretary, Marta, and her family."

"Not with your partner?"

"No. I'm buying Mack out. His wife doesn't like me."

"Jealous?"

"Um-hmm," she admitted. "It really aggravates me. Mack is old enough to be my father. We make a good team, but now, well, it's best to go our separate ways."

"How did you get started with him?"

She recognized Reid's delicate probing into her life. Strangely, she didn't really mind, although she would have from anyone else.

"Let's see, after I arrived in Houston, I got a job as an inspector in an electronics company. In the evening, I worked as a waitress. I took some courses in bookkeeping and found three clients who trusted me to handle their accounts. One of them was Mack."

"What did you do in your spare time?" Reid asked.

"I saved my money, and I looked for something to invest in—I had a sizable

savings account by then. But I was afraid of the stock market. I had no experience there. Then I thought of Mack's deli. He had an excellent location in downtown Houston and he did a good business. I knew he could do a lot better. His place needed improving, brightening up. I approached him with my idea that we would form a partnership. I'd put in new capital while he supplied an established name. I already knew of a location in a shopping mall that we could use to open a second shop. So that's what we did. The rest is history, as they say."

"So where does your Silver Spoon Gourmet Shop fit in?" he asked. He used both hands to swing the wheel for the turn into his drive. They were home.

"That was a later idea, and I incorporated it separately. Mack didn't want to go into it. Thought it was too risky," she briefly explained.

"Or his wife did."

"Yes," she murmured, climbing out without waiting for him.

She waited on the porch steps, her mind on the coming problem with Vivian, Mack's troublesome spouse. According to Keri's attorney, she was threatening to sue, saying that Keri had used money from the partnership to start the gourmet takeout business and therefore owed Mack half of it in order to dissolve the partnership.

The woman was a pest, she concluded as Reid laid an arm across her shoulders, taking her into the house with him and up the stairs to her bedroom.

"Your aunt told me your grandmother was the daughter of an Acadian fisherman," she commented at the door.

Reid twisted the bronzed knob. "Um-hmm. Gram said she chose the colors for this room because they re-

minded her of the sunflowers that grew by her window at the little cottage where they lived."

His bright gaze flicked over the brown-and-gold color scheme before his lips descended on her parted ones, catching her off guard.

"I'll call you when it's time to get ready for the next feast," he murmured, his eyes devouring her slender figure. He closed the door between them.

Keri slipped out of her dress and shoes. Folding the covers back, she lay down and spun into a rapturous daydream that she knew could become very real in just a few moments with Reid. However, she wasn't quite ready for things to go that far.

"NEITHER OF YOUR AUNT'S was what I had expected," she said the next day.

Aunt Amy had been slightly smaller than Hester, but the family resemblance was unmistakable in their oval faces and gray eyes. The older sister was quieter and had a stronger personality than the younger.

They continued walking along the cleared bank.

"There's something I want you to see," Reid said, guiding her along an overgrown path that veered away from the canal. Soon they came to a house that sat inside a fenced yard. A cottage, for it had no more than four rooms.

"How lovely it is! Whose is it?" she asked.

"Yours," he answered. "I bought it for you."

"I see," she murmured. "When?"

"Ten years ago."

Keri looked back along the path they had followed. Twenty minutes at a fast walk from Reid's home to this cottage.

Her smile was brittle. "How convenient."

She turned and walked quickly back to the levee, but hands curved over her shoulders, gentle in their touch, as Reid stopped her, pulling her around to face him.

She raised her head, her expression blandly smooth.

"I'm sorry, Keri," he said simply.

His sincere apology released the frozen anger in her. "How dare you think I would have been your mistress!" she ground out in a low, furious voice.

"I know," he said. "Marriage never occurred to me."

"Heaven forbid! A Beausan marry a waitress? Don't worry, Reid. I never expected it of you."

She twisted from him and ran along the steep embankment to the end of the canal where she threw herself to the ground, drawing up her knees against her chest, her arms around them. She stared out at the lake.

Reid caught up and sat beside her but not touching. She kept her face averted. When the curve of her spine relaxed, Reid began to question her on her life. "Weren't you tempted at all, these past ten years, to marry? Didn't you meet anyone you considered as a husband?" he asked.

"No. Maybe one," she finally admitted, "but he was already married. What about you? How many mistresses have you had in the little cottage in the woods, Reid?" she asked cruelly.

He winced as she meant him to. "A couple," he admitted. "But it was no good. Life was no good without you."

With brisk movements, she stood. "You managed to survive okay."

His fascinating gaze swept over her. "It was only survival, not living. I in-

tend to live from now on. With you," he said as she retreated.

*

"WELL, IT'S BACK to the mills and salt mines for me," Reid announced Monday morning over his coffee. It was an old joke between Keri and him, since an extensive salt mine was part of his business empire.

Placing both arms around her so that he could feel her pressed against him, he gazed down at her with lazy satisfaction. Slowly he lowered his head, bending a little, curving his body into hers so their lips could meet.

"Ummm," he murmured, "you taste good."

He grabbed one more quick kiss and, taking her hand, made her walk him to the door and wave goodbye as he drove off to work.

Back inside, she found the butler having coffee and chatting with Mrs. Jannis, the cook.

"Uh...excuse me, Mr. Milton," she said. "Would you drive me to the bus station in town, please? I'll be ready in about thirty minutes."

"The, ah, bus station?" he asked.

Keri smiled brightly. "Yes." Before he could ask embarrassing questions, she turned and sped up the stairs to the bedroom, where she quickly packed.

She checked her appearance in the mirror. Her cheeks were a little flushed, her eyes defiant. Her brown slacks and tan pullover were suitable for traveling. She would go by bus to the New Orleans airport and catch a plane for Houston.

Sadness descended like a weight on her slim shoulders.

She and Reid had had a pleasant weekend.

Turning from the mirror, she said a silent farewell to the cheerful room. She hated to leave without saying goodbye to Reid, but he left her no choice.

She carried her luggage down to the entrance hall. Milton came out of the library.

"Mr. Beausan would like to speak to you, Miss Thomas," he said and disappeared toward the kitchen.

Keri stared after him, then slowly entered the library. Surely Milton hadn't called and told Reid of her plans.

"Keri," Reid barked, "if you leave before I get home tonight, I swear I'll flay an inch of skin off your backside when I catch up with you!"

"Milton had no business calling you," she fumed.

"He was following my orders," Reid informed her.

"Now listen, Reid Beausan..."

"You listen, Keri Thomas! You be there tonight. No more sneaking off like a thief. Do you hear me?"

"How could I not?" she muttered. "All right, I'll see you tonight!" She plunked the receiver back and, grabbing her cases, returned them to the bedroom.

Finally, calming down, she went to the library to make her business calls. A pot of fresh coffee and a plate of homemade cookies sat on the end of the massive desk. An apology in the form of a peace offering.

A few minutes later she was chatting with Marta, her secretary of five years and the nearest person to a best friend that she had.

Keri debated calling Vic Zimmerman, her attorney. He was a good friend. Too good, she admitted, the only man to tempt her since Reid.

Several expressions chased over Keri's face: amusement, irony, then a

stillness as she wondered why Reid hadn't married. Sighing, she dialed Vic's number.

KERI was in the library when Reid came home at six.

Placing his hands on either arm of her chair, he leaned over to claim a kiss, but Keri turned her head away.

Reid drew one sharp breath, then through gritted teeth said, "Don't play games with me, Keri. I'm in no mood for them."

One finger lightly under her averted chin, he lifted her face to his. His lips covered her mouth in his usual kiss of sensual expertise, making her want much more from him.

But there wasn't going to be more, she reminded herself sternly. Reid Beausan had to learn he couldn't have it all his way.

"Reid," she began tentatively.

He walked over to the liquor cabinet, extracted a small glass and poured her a sherry. "Here, darling. You seem nervous," he purred as he handed it to her.

She accepted the glass, started to speak, but the words wouldn't come. He strolled over and prepared a small drink for himself.

"How was your day?" she asked coolly.

"Are you really interested? Or are you trying to divert me from my ultimate goal? It won't work," he said.

"Goal?"

"You know. I don't have to put it into words." Suddenly he was standing beside her. His hand reached down to her. "Or do I? Do you want to hear me say how much I want you?"

He sat on the arm of the chair. His

fingers tangled in the cloud of tumbling curls that hung past her shoulders.

"Is that what you want, gypsy?" he crooned. "I don't mind admitting my feelings. I want you. I've lain awake nights dreaming of making love to you again. No other woman has ever satisfied me since you." He bent close. "Does it please you to have so much power over me?"

Keri shook her head, unable to speak. His words of desire were scintillating, making her glow inside. Every word, every glance, every action of his fueled that fire. She knew how it could rage out of control.

There was a soft knock on the door. "Dinner," Milton called politely from the hall.

Reid released her, and Keri found she could breathe once more as he moved to let her up. She accepted his hand as he escorted her to the dining room.

The meal was a strained affair as the butler moved about silently, serving salad, a chicken-and-rice dish, vegetables and finally dessert. Keri refused the latter with a curt "No, thank you, Milton." She glared at him and a dull flush spread up his neck.

"Stop harassing Milton. He was doing his job," Reid said.

"Nobody likes a tattletale," she muttered.

Reid's mouth twitched with a smile, and when he stood, signaling the end of dinner, they returned to the library.

Keri glanced at him as he settled on the extra-large, heavily padded sofa opposite her chair. She looked away. There was no mistaking it—he was making love to her with his eyes.

"Keri," he murmured. "Come here."

She clutched the arm of the chair.

"Really, how was your day? Everything okay at the mines?" she asked.

He sighed loudly. "There's some leakage, saltwater intrusion at one of the sites. The engineers are studying the problem, but we've evacuated that chamber and the adjoining ones. I don't want to take any chances with the men."

"Oh, yes. I mean, of course not."

Silence. Then Reid kicked off his shoes and stretched out on the couch. He held out a hand.

With a sudden lunge, he was off the sofa and beside her, scooping her into his arms and, before she knew it, striding out of the room.

Milton was in the hall as Reid started up the broad steps. "Would you care for coffee in the library, sir?" the butler asked.

"No," Reid replied. "That will be all for the night, Milton."

"Thank you, sir."

"You, you beast!" Keri spluttered. "You can't do this," she protested as he kicked open the door to his bedroom, then closed it behind them. He put her down beside the king-size bed.

"You belong to me." His aquamarine eyes flowed over her. "I had meant to wait until after you saw the doctor. I was going to take you out to dinner Friday night, then bring you back here. But I think you need to be shown that you are mine."

"You don't own me. No one does." She backed away from him, came up short against the bed.

He shook his dark head. "It works both ways, sweetheart. Whether you want to admit it or not, we belong to each other."

His long, slender fingers closed over her shoulders and he molded his hands to her form, kneading her soft flesh.

"Come to me, sweet gypsy," he murmured as his hands slipped along her back, bringing her to him. He moved forward, one foot sliding between her feet, his thigh pressing against hers. "Come to me and make me live again," he whispered as his lips came down on hers.

She wanted him, had wanted him from the moment she'd opened her eyes that stormy night and looked into his. Even then, her first thought had been of him as a lover, although she had tried to deny him that right. But now she could deny nothing. She wanted him!

Her arms wrapped around his broad shoulders, circling him with her warmth. When he released her lips to explore her throat, she rained kisses along his cheek.

"Oh, Reid," she cried with a soft moan of rapture.

"It's going to be so good," he groaned deeply, his teeth nipping along the ridge of her neck.

His hands moved along her spine, sliding under her tan pullover to caress the bare skin along her sides. He found her bra and unhooked it with ease.

Reid had removed his coat and tie when he came home. Now Keri tugged at his white shirt until it was free of his suit pants. Then her hands were on his flesh.

The fire was blazing higher in her, and she clutched him fiercely to her. One by one she unfastened his shirt buttons while his eyes seared her. She pushed the shirt off his shoulders and down his arms until it dropped to the carpet.

Before she could unbuckle his belt, he interceded. "You next." He stripped her sweater over her head in one smooth motion, taking her loosened bra with it.

"Reid, don't! I—I don't think I can

stand it," she pleaded. It had been so long since she had known desire in this man's arms.

"It's good, isn't it?" he demanded.

"Oh, yes. Unbearably good," she whispered. Her hands returned to undressing him.

He let her proceed until he stood naked before her, proudly male and unembarrassed by his body's natural reactions. Lazily, he reached for the button and zipper of her slacks. In another minute, she stood nude, too.

Smiling, Reid once more clasped her shoulders, nudging her backward to the quilted bedspread, and covering her with his body.

Propped on one arm, a leg wrapped securely over her, Reid plied her with kisses and long, stroking caresses that became more and more intimate and insistent.

"Oh, Reid," she gasped. With unexpected strength, she pushed him over, rising to cover his chest with her own kisses. Now it was she who explored and rediscovered all the exciting areas of touch that he liked.

His body was familiar to her in so many ways. She remembered the feel of him as her fingers tenderly touched the keys to his passion; she recalled the taste of him as she nibbled at his masculine form; and she reexperienced the smell of him as she inhaled the aftershave along his strong, slightly raspy jawline, and the faint, lusty scent of his maleness.

"No, baby, that's enough," he gasped thickly when she became especially bold with her mouth and hands. He pulled her to his chest.

Their mouths met in long, drugging kisses while fires raged between them.

"Haven't you missed this?" he asked huskily, his hand sliding between them

to cup her breast. "And this." With a sudden twist that caused the room to swirl, he turned her until he was once again in the superior position.

Urgent cries burst from her throat.

"Yes, yes, I missed it. I missed you," she confessed. She pulled him fiercely to her. "Please, Reid, please, don't tease. You told me not to. So don't you, either."

"All right, darling. I'll give you what you want, what we both want," he promised in a heated avowal.

She felt the controlled thrust of his body. Then he was still.

"Don't move," he warned.

But she was beyond waiting. "I can't help it," she panted. Her body writhed, demanding his participation in the exquisite firing of her passion. She was heading for the starburst.

"Gypsy!"

Reid was with her as one when it happened. Together they experienced a cataclysmic explosion of the known universe that swept them both away on an endless, heavenly journey.

The shock waves continued to ripple through their tightly clasped bodies for long minutes after the starburst receded, leaving them too weak to move. Eventually, Reid rolled to his side, taking her with him.

When they were both breathing normally again, he spoke. "How could you leave this behind?"

Keri didn't answer his question.

"I realize that you were hurt back then when I told you to go home, that I didn't have time for you, but couldn't you have waited? Or tried to contact me?"

She heard the hurt wonder in his voice. "I didn't see any future for us then." Unspoken but heard by both of

them was the rest of her thought: "Or now." She tilted her head to look at him.

His eyes still glowed with the passion whose embers had never gone out between them. He smoothed the wild tangle of hair from her damp forehead. "We'll work it out. We'll have it all again."

But Keri knew that the past was gone, that it was an illusion to think they could recapture it. Time, like money, could only buy the moment, not forever.

"Was it ever like this with your Texas lovers?" Reid asked suddenly.

"No," she said sleepily. Texas lovers! She'd often been working three jobs there, with hardly time to eat and sleep.

"Not even the one you liked?"

"I told you he was married. We didn't even share a kiss. Not one."

Reid relaxed beside her. "I'm sorry. I'm just so damned jealous of everyone who shared those years with you. Don't leave me again, gypsy." It wasn't a request but an order.

"Reid, we need to talk...."

"Shhh," he whispered. "Later. I promise." He yawned, then settled her more comfortably against him and drifted into sleep.

Keri was wide awake. Her gaze strayed to the man who slumbered so securely in her arms. She understood him so much better now. It was obvious that he was reaching back to a happier time in his past through her. Certainly, she understood that very human desire. She smiled tenderly at him. Reid was very, very human. And she loved him with all her heart. But she realized that they couldn't return to the early days of their romance. She had finally learned this lesson after all the years of running away.

What should she do? Stay until he woke up to the facts of life? Until he grew tired of her? Could she take it?

Next to love, passion was the strongest tie between a man and a woman, she thought. And she was tied by both of them.

She went to sleep at last, only to waken sometime after midnight. Reid's arms were cradled around her, his lips on her breasts. His passion kindled her desire to matching heights, and she knew again the wonder of the universe in his embrace.

Seize the day, her common sense advised. Let the past and the future take care of themselves.

"Yes," she whispered, "yes."

THE WEEK SPED BY, each day bringing its own joy. And sorrow, too, Keri admitted on Friday. Each night that she spent in Reid's arms only bound her that much tighter to him.

Too many ties, she thought, sighing. Too many rivets bolting her life to his. She had to leave, get out of his house to regain her sense and her perspective.

Love and desire. What silken webs they weave for the unwary. Hadn't she learned anything during her lifetime? Hadn't life taught her not to care too much?

Reid was coming for her before lunch. They were going to eat in the city, see the doctor for her final checkup and go out for dinner that night.

The drive around the lake and into New Orleans didn't take long.

Keri was pronounced fit after her examination. For a minute, the doctor spoke to her and Reid in his office, cautioning her about colds and fatigue during the coming winter.

"Otherwise, she can resume all normal activities?" Reid asked with a wealth of meaning in his voice.

"Oh, yes," the doctor said, "she can do that anytime she feels up to it."

Keri's face was still red when she and Reid were walking down the hall to the exit a few minutes later. But her embarrassment eventually gave way to a deep contentment as they meandered along some of the older roads instead of taking the interstate highway. It was dark and Keri was getting hungry again when Reid turned off the road into a winding drive. Her eyes widened in recognition as he parked.

"Are we having dinner here?" she asked. It was the posh restaurant where she and Reid had first met.

That Reid still came here frequently and that he had called for a reservation were evident by the greeting of the *maitre d'*, who bowed them to a table next to the window where they could watch the traffic on the river.

After ordering a glass of wine for her and a scotch and soda for himself, he lounged back in his chair, a satisfied smile on his attractive face.

"When I first saw you," he commented nostalgically, "you were leaning over that table right there." He pointed it out. "I remember thinking your smile could turn a raging bull into a moony-eyed calf, it was so lovely. And still is," he added.

Keri found a smile. She wouldn't spoil his evening, but she wanted to crawl off someplace and be alone.

"We share a lot of good memories," he told her. The smile he returned to hers had a little quirk in it.

Oh, Reid, she pleaded, don't you know what you do to me? How will I survive when this is over?

"I liked you in red. Don't you ever wear it?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Not since I worked here."

"We'll get you a red dress for Christmas," he began. "You'll wear it to the Christmas party...."

"What Christmas party?"

"I have one at my house every year. It sort of repays my social obligations, celebrates the holiday season and marks another year off my life." He grinned at her.

"Your birthday? You never told me it was near Christmas. When?"

"The twenty-first. There's a lot we don't know about each other, Keri. But we'll discover it gradually."

So he was looking at a long-term affair, she thought. Maybe their love could last for years. She should try to quit thinking, and start enjoying. Except that she was a long-term planner, too. And she had a life of her own to live, and a business to run.

After dinner, she and Reid danced to slow music.

"Ready to go?" he murmured when they returned to their table. The smoldering flames in his aquamarine eyes caused a tremor to start in her.

Instead of driving straight to his house, he turned off on a dirt road that led through the woods to a clearing beside the canal.

"Remember this place, darling?" His voice was husky. "It's where we first made love." He reached for her, lifting her so that he could move over to her side of the seat and hold her in his lap as he had all those years ago.

He kissed her for a long time while his hands roamed her curves. Keri knew he was remembering that summer of long ago. Inside, she wept.

"Shall we make love here again, for old times' sake? Or do you want to go home?"

"Here," she said. She could give him this much, this one night from the past. There was no desire in her now, only a wistful wish to please this man, which she did in the most elemental, satisfying manner, giving in every way that she could.

When they returned to his house, she waited until he was well asleep. She took her weekend case and left before the gray of dawn appeared on the horizon.

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KERI PUT HER HANDS over her ears until the shrill ringing of the telephone stopped abruptly in mid-ring. It had been ringing all weekend. But after sneaking out on Reid early Saturday morning, the last thing she wanted was to talk to him.

She was better off here in Houston where there were no memories of the past to haunt her, no person who knew her before she came out here and made a new life for herself. She would forget....

A stabbing pain coursed through her chest, reminding her of the pain of the accident. With a tortured sigh, she paced restlessly around the room. She would always remember Reid's eyes. Each time she looked at the Gulf when she went to the coast, she would see those aquamarine eyes, bold and brilliant as he looked at her.

But she couldn't have stayed! It was destroying her to be with him and yet not have him. Nothing he had done had indicated that he wanted more than her body. And she wouldn't be that, a con-

venient body, for any man, not even Reid, whom she loved.

She could never forget...and she didn't want to. Forget Reid? Forget her one and only love? She would have to forget how to breathe first, how to walk, to talk—everything—before she forgot Reid Beausan.

So she would learn to live without him again. All the shattered pieces of her heart ached. She would have to live on memories and forget the dreams....

The next morning, Keri took a cab to work at the two-story building that contained the kitchens and offices of the Silver Spoon Gourmet shops. She went first to see Chef Paul.

"We had about given you up for dead," he said as he took her extended hand and leaned forward to kiss her cheek. His dark eyes surveyed her carefully. "Glad to see you."

"I'm glad to be back. How are things?"

"Fine," he exclaimed. "No problem."

"Did Marta ask you to prepare lunch? I have a meeting..."

"Yes, yes, yes. It is taken care of."

She headed for the offices.

Marta ran to her as soon as she opened the door, hugging her as if she had been gone a year rather than four weeks.

"Thank God you're here!" she exclaimed. "I've been trying to reach you all weekend..."

"What's wrong?" Keri asked, suppressing the pangs of guilt for not answering her phone.

"That Vivian! She's got a lawyer to file suit and a court order to examine all your financial records since you went into business with Mack...that traitor!"

"Have you or Vic talked to Mack?"

"No. That spineless worm wouldn't dare..." Seeing the look on her boss's face, Marta stopped.

Keri sighed. "I should have returned last week. Maybe I could have headed this off." She shook her head. "Life gets so complicated."

"Oh, Keri!" Marta stopped. Then, "You have some things on your desk to take care of," she finished cryptically.

"What are they?"

"Oh, the usual, bills and things." Marta was oddly casual after her initial enthusiasm. "Go on in. The coffee should be ready. Chef Paul sent some cinnamon rolls up."

Giving Marta a searching glance, Keri opened the door to her office, and walked inside, half expecting to see Vic there. The door closed softly behind her.

Sea-bright eyes danced over her trim figure. "Hi, remember me?" Reid asked coolly. "I'm the lover you're always running out on," he reminded her, his eyes narrowing.

"Reid," Keri gasped. "What are you doing here? Please, go away."

"Rain, rain, go away, come again another day?" he asked in a sing-song voice.

"No, don't come back," she whispered.

He arched one brow. "You're not getting away, not now that I've found you again."

"You didn't find me! It was that stupid accident!" she said desperately. She didn't want him here. She'd had no memories of him in Texas to haunt her. Now he would be everywhere in her life. It wasn't fair!

"Fate gave you back to me," he said smugly.

Keri removed her jacket. Shakily, she poured a cup of coffee and replenished

his cup when he held it out to her. She went to her executive chair.

A hand closed over her wrist before she could pick up her cup. "Why didn't you just ask to be driven to the airport?"

"Would you have let me go?" she demanded, feeling a little more in control of herself, experiencing a growing pleasure at seeing him. He had, after all, followed her back to Houston!

"No," he said. He released her arm and perched on the desk.

"Well, then, what did you expect me to do?" Her voice climbed a notch in righteous anger.

He tilted his head in an arrogant manner. "We could have discussed it. You could have tried using your wiles on me," he suggested.

"I don't operate like that." Her voice was cold. "Reid," she gritted, "I don't want you here."

His teasing glance hardened to stone. "Why? Does it embarrass you that your secretary and staff know that I'm your lover? Were you perhaps planning some clandestine rendezvous, meeting me in secret now and then?"

"I wasn't planning to meet you at all!" she denied.

"Oh, weren't you?" he asked softly. "So you were going to write off what we shared this past week forever. Could you really walk away from that?"

"You won't give me a chance to find out!"

His hand reached out, smoothing her hair. "You had ten years to find out, and it was as if we had never parted the minute you opened your eyes and looked into mine in the hospital. You knew then that we were still lovers. It was only a matter of time before you were in my bed again."

Keri was helpless against his will. He

wanted her, and nothing could change his mind. She could sense the threads of their lives becoming hopelessly entangled.

"You shouldn't be here." There was a plea in her voice.

His face softened. "I'm going to help you, honey."

She pulled away from him, reaching to pick up her coffee cup, sipping the hot liquid to give her time to think.

"We had a lovely summer romance all those years ago, a delightful fling at a time in your life that was happy and carefree. I can understand that you might want to recapture that time...but Reid, the people that we were are gone. Don't you see that?"

He studied her a long time before answering. "I'm almost thirty-five years old. Well past the age of fantasy. I know what I want. Do you, Keri?"

She looked away in confusion. She had thought she did. "Reid..."

"Let's try it, sweetheart. Just one day at a time. If it's just a fling, as you say, well, what harm is done? We'll have had a good time together, won't we? Aren't we terrific together?"

"Yes, but..."

"Now," he said briskly, "tell me about this problem Paul and Marta were talking about earlier."

"What about your problem at the mine?" she asked.

"I had to call in a team of experts. My secretary has your number here and at home, so she'll keep me informed. I may have to leave on short notice, but meanwhile, let's get to work on your little contretemps with your partner. I'll need to see your records and those from the delicatessens. We'll plan a strategy with your attorney when he gets here.

Do you have your personal bank account records available?"

"Yes." She answered several more questions to give him a clearer picture.

"You're really something," he said when she had explained how she got started and her ideas for expanding.

Something warm and wonderful and scary grew in Keri at his words. She wished that things were different between them. If they were meeting now for the first time, they could fall in love as equals.... But the past couldn't be changed. And while Reid wanted her passionately, he didn't love her. So she would try to do as he asked, live each day as it came.

VIC ZIMMERMAN CAME at one o'clock for their luncheon meeting. Afterwards, Keri called Marta in and told her that Reid would be helping solve the problem with Vivian. The secretary looked from one to the other and grinned. She volunteered to round up the records that he wanted to study.

When Reid showed no signs of quitting as the clock passed six, Keri went down to the kitchen and fixed them a light supper.

Just the two of them, she thought with a yearning look at his head bent over the ledgers. If it could only be that way forever. But one day at a time was all they had.

After the meal, they decided to call it a day. Helping her lock up, Reid escorted her to his rental car.

"You'll have to direct me to your place from here," he requested.

Soon they were parked in her garage space at the five-story apartment building where she lived.

Reid opened the trunk of the car and

took out a piece of brown luggage. The suitcase that she had left at his place wasn't in there. He saw her quick glance.

"We'll have to buy two sets of clothes if we do much traveling back and forth," he said, taking her arm.

Once in her apartment, Reid glanced into the kitchen and dining room, then went down the short hall and inspected the two bedrooms. He left his case in the guest bedroom.

"What are you doing?" Keri asked.

Reid's liquid gaze ran over her. "I've looked for you twice now. If you want me in your bed this time, you'll have to issue the invitation."

Keri chose to ignore his statement, inviting him to make himself comfortable. Then she quickly sought refuge in her bedroom behind the closed door.

Changing into a comfortable, modest caftan, she joined him in the living room, sitting in one of the green velvet chairs rather than on the brocade sofa where he sprawled. They watched a TV magazine program, then the early news.

Reid stood, yawned, and announced that he was going to bed. He strolled off down the hall.

Keri was tired when she climbed into bed, but her eyes refused to close. Finally, she drifted into a restless slumber.

An hour later, she woke, every nerve tense.

Reid stood by her bed. "I can't sleep," he declared plaintively.

Swallowing hard against the sudden knot in her throat, Keri asked, "Would you like to join me?"

He sighed. "I thought you'd never ask."

SHE WOKE the next morning to the sounds of the shower and a bass voice

singing about the yellow rose of Texas.

A slow smile curved around her mouth as she stretched luxuriously. His lovemaking hadn't been at all what she had expected. He had been slow and gentle with her. It had given her an odd feeling, as if he were telling her of more than just desire.

She joined her lover in the shower. He welcomed her with a big smile and proceeded to soap her all over. It was a long while before they got around to breakfast and made a dash for the office.

That day set the pattern for the rest of the week. They worked late each night, ate most of their meals from Paul's trays at lunch and at night.

Reid had left the office on Tuesday and returned with the records from the delicatessen that Vivian had been keeping under lock and key. He had breezily dismissed Keri's questions about his obtaining them.

"Honey, she couldn't keep them from me. You and Mack are partners, not her. I pointed out that a court order would be forthcoming to exclude her from the premises. A quick call to her lawyer convinced her I meant business!"

On Friday, he threw down his pencil and flicked her a sultry glance. "Let's go out tonight, sweetheart. Dinner, maybe a show or dancing later?"

"Sounds good," she agreed.

Reid took her to one of the most expensive restaurants in Houston. She wore a long black sleeveless silk dress with a short white jacket. A black-gold-and-burgundy-striped scarf was knotted casually around her neck.

Reid refused to discuss business during dinner or later when they danced for a couple of hours before going home. That night he tucked her into bed beside

him, kissed her good-night and promptly went to sleep, leaving her stewing about his plans.

"WHAT ARE your plans for today?" he asked her the next morning over a breakfast of waffles. "Let's go to the shopping center where your gourmet shop is. I've seen one deli, but I haven't had a chance to look over your pride and joy yet."

She smiled broadly at him. "Okay, we can have lunch there. Saturday is one of our busiest days."

After lunch, Reid said, "Come on, honey. I want to take you shopping. That red dress, remember?"

She led him to her favorite store, and in a few minutes, they were looking at three possibilities.

"I like that one." He indicated a flowing, flame-colored dress with a plunging neckline. "Try it on."

Keri went along to a dressing room and, standing on tiptoes, she had to agree that it was right for her. The neckline dipped in soft folds from gathered shoulders to a tantalizing plunge between her high, firm breasts. It fit her narrow waistline, its shifting iridescence falling in deeper folds around her ankles.

She went out to show Reid, who nodded in satisfaction, then stood patiently while the hem was measured for shortening.

Reid was disappointed that they weren't taking the dress home, but insisted on buying accessories for it, then asked her to help him pick out Christmas gifts for his aunts.

"Happy?" he asked, squeezing her hand in his.

"Yes, for now."

OVER BREAKFAST Sunday morning, Keri noticed that Reid looked rather grim as he read the paper. He had been strangely quiet since yesterday. She wondered what was wrong. The night before she had again tried to talk to him about his strategy in dealing with Mack and Vivian, but he hadn't wanted to discuss it.

She was seriously opposed to any public exposure that might hurt her partner. Mack had been her only friend when she was struggling to get started, though she knew almost from the start that Vivian was taking items from the business. At the beginning, it had been little things: food and drink, a case of beer or a package of rolls. Later, it had been money, or appliances charged to the deli that hadn't arrived there.

Keri had replaced the money from her own funds. The other things she had ignored. Mack didn't know all this. He had left the two women to handle the books.

Reid glanced up, saw Keri studying him and smiled at her. Her expression became more serious. "What are you going to do on Tuesday, Reid?"

"Don't you trust me, sweetheart?" He laid the paper aside.

"Of course I do! I just don't want Mack hurt."

"Don't you think I understand your feelings for him? I'll respect those feelings, Keri. He won't know anything about his wife's double dipping."

Keri winced. "So you discovered it. I was afraid you would."

Reid nodded, his jaw tightening in anger. "It's rather obvious when the bank deposit is fifty dollars short one day compared to the cash register receipts, then suddenly fifty dollars over, a few days later, so the accounts are balanced for the month."

"What are you going to do when we meet with them? How are you going to keep Mack from knowing?"

Reid stroked away the line of anxiety on her brow. "I'm not sure yet. It depends on what information turns up tomorrow."

On Monday, Reid spent the day on his own mysterious comings and goings, with frequent consultation with Marta that he didn't clue Keri in on. She was a little irritated with him over his secrecy, but trusted his promise that Mack wouldn't be hurt.

"Come in," Reid said to Vic the next afternoon at one o'clock, when the attorney presented himself at the office for a briefing and lunch before Mack, Vivian and their attorney, Mr. Black, arrived at two.

A few minutes before two, Marta announced the others.

Vivian came in first. The couple's lawyer followed her. Mack came in last. Keri made crisp introductions all around and invited them to be seated.

"You said you were interested in settling this without going to court?" Mr. Black opened the discussion.

Vic answered. "Yes, we have certain information that we feel will convince you of the fairness of my client's offer."

"What type of information?" Mr. Black asked.

"I believe that Mr. Beausan has the accounts and ledgers that will show you...."

Mr. Black looked puzzled as he leaned closer. His hard glance swiveled to Vivian, who bent over to gaze at the entry. She gasped audibly.

Mack went to have a look, and Reid casually turned the page. "Here," he pointed out, "are the totals of all income and expenses from the two delis during

the first year of the operation." He pulled out a loose paper. "Here are Keri's personal expenses and income as well as her expenses for the gourmet shop."

Smoothly, he continued showing them the details.

Finally, he closed the book and returned to his seat. "So, as you can see, all Keri's accounts are in perfect order. However, as a goodwill gesture and for the use of the established name of the deli, I'm going to suggest that she add to her offer a percentage of the profit from the two shops for the next fiscal year. Would you be agreeable to that?" he asked Keri.

"Yes, ten percent," Keri agreed. It was a small price to be rid of the burden of Vivian's dislike and jealousy.

"She doesn't need to pay for the name," Mack suddenly said. "She's the one who made it. If it's worth anything today, it's because of her."

Keri went over to him, taking his hands in hers. "You gave me my start. You believed in me. I couldn't have made it without you," she said softly. "I want to do it, if you're satisfied it's a fair offer."

He blinked his eyes, then nodded. "Yes, it's fair."

"Of course it is," Vivian said. "Of course we'll take it." She was now anxious to conclude the matter.

A few minutes later, Keri was bidding them goodbye.

After shutting the door, Keri spun around to face Reid and flung herself into his arms.

"Oh, Reid, you were wonderful! I was so proud!" she exclaimed, planting kisses on his strong jawline.

"Honey, save some for later," Reid advised.

She stepped back. "Let me see what was in that ledger."

Solemnly, he handed it to her, opening it at the first page that he had let Vivian and her attorney see but not Mack. It was the invoice for a clothes dryer, billed to the deli but delivered and installed at her home address. Other invoices appeared clipped to other pages as Keri flipped through the record.

She sighed. "I'm glad it's over. But I'm going to miss Mack, maybe even Vivian," she added.

Reid dropped an arm around her shoulders. "Now, darling, it's time to think about heading back for Louisiana. I need to get back to the salt mine...."

"I understand," she murmured. "When will you be leaving?"

"Not me. Us," he said. "You're going with me."

"No, Reid, I'm not," she answered quietly and waited for the explosion.

*

"ALL RIGHT" he said. "I realize you have things to tidy up here. When can you come? Friday?"

She swallowed nervously. "I won't be there Friday, either," she said. Her eyes met his, refusing to flinch.

"When?" he asked, his voice as soft as hers.

Her hand reached out for him, to beseech his understanding. "Never," she whispered.

Reid brought both his fists down on her desk with a crash. "Dammit, Keri, why?" he demanded.

She locked her arms around herself as if holding her body together and walked to the window, staring into the street below. "I want it to end now. I don't want to drag it out to the point where we're

both looking for excuses not to fly up for a weekend."

"I see," he said.

She turned, bravely confronting him. "You must see..." she began reasonably.

"Oh, I see a lot more than you think I do," he said.

"You must see that a clean break is better." She gave a nervous laugh. "A long-distance love affair would soon be an unbearable strain."

"I quite agree." And saying that, he spun on his heel and walked out without another word.

Keri tottered over to her chair and sat down weakly. In a moment, she heard a car pull out into the street below.

He was gone, she thought. Just like that. It was...devastating.

It was better this way, she told herself. She had to get on with her life.

She dictated several letters to Marta for their suppliers, signed some checks, wrote memos, filed her own records and talked to Paul about the specials for the next week. Finally, it was time to go home.

She slowly made her way out to the parking lot. The rental car was there.

Reid sat behind the wheel, his gaze fastened on her as she trekked the long-short distance between them. She opened the door and climbed in.

"Reid..."

"Hush," he whispered, taking her into his arms. "It's okay, baby. We'll do it your way."

After placing her back into her seat, he started the engine and drove off toward the apartment. "Is it all right for me to stay with you tonight, a sort of farewell party?" he asked politely.

"Yes, of course," she murmured.

At her apartment, Reid suggested, "Let's go out for pizza."

They changed into jeans and went to a local pizza parlor and drank red wine. Then they went home.

After the evening news ended, he turned off the lamp and sauntered off to their bedroom. She followed.

Reid was already removing his clothing. He brushed his teeth and finished his preparations for bed without speaking. She began to feel annoyed that he could be so casual about this, their last night together.

She went into the bathroom and took care of her nightly routine, slipped into a nightgown and demurely got into bed, turning out the light. Reid lay on his side with closed eyes.

She felt his large hand caress her stomach, and with a soft sigh, she turned to him, snuggling into his embrace. His breath touched her hair before his face lowered to find her lips.

His kiss was long, tender and passionately persuasive. In a while, he slipped her out of the gown so that their bodies could touch.

His lovemaking was everything she could want it to be. Neither of them withheld any part of their desire. It was the very deepest, the most complete sharing between two human beings.

For long minutes, they lay in a half daze of exhausted bliss. Then Reid raised himself on an elbow beside her.

"Sweet gypsy," he murmured, "can you really walk out on this?"

Her body became stiff. "You did that deliberately, didn't you, Reid? You thought you could use sex to force me to do what you want, but it won't work. I still mean it. This is the end!"

With a muttered imprecation, he swung out of bed, pulled on his jeans in

the dark, then turned on the lamp and faced her. The look in his eyes was one of contempt.

"You have a pretty high opinion of me, Keri, to think I'd do that," he said in disgust. "But you're wrong. I don't want anything from you. Not anymore." He walked to the door.

"I'm leaving now." His voice became very soft. "I won't be back. I'm sorry if you think I've misused you. I just wanted to share something with you that seemed very wonderful to me. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe it was just a dream from the past."

He sighed, a rueful smile touching his lips. "I forced you to stay with me once and I came after you when you left. I won't do that again. If you ever want me, you know where I'll be."

He came over to the bed, kissed her once, lightly, and left.

His words, "Goodbye, gypsy," haunted the night long after he was gone.

KERI SAID good-night to Marta and returned to her report. Finally, she laid it aside, staring out the window. The rain beat with slow monotony against the pane. It had been three days since Reid had left, and the weather had been dreary ever since.

She locked up and went out to the rental car she was driving while waiting for her new Porsche to arrive. All the business ends of her life were neatly tied up now. It was only the personal ones that were dangling, she admitted when she walked into her empty apartment. She switched on the TV just to hear the sound of another voice.

After the local news at six, the scene flicked to one in Louisiana where flood-

ing from unknown sources had trapped a team of experts in a salt mine. The men had been examining the site because of water intrusion, the reporter announced. Keri sat stunned as she listened. It was Reid's mine.

Suddenly he appeared on the screen. Dressed in jeans and a windbreaker, he paused to answer questions. "Yes," he said, "we know where the three men are. We have an air pipe into the chamber, and we know they aren't injured. The water is chest high and rising. We're dropping a tunnel from above and at an angle.

"No," he answered yet another question. "It will be several hours yet. Probably tomorrow. I'll keep you informed."

For countless minutes she sat there staring at the TV, her mind in a whirl. Her jumbled thoughts condensed into one compelling notion: Reid needed her.

Calling the airport, she found there was no immediate flight out.

Undaunted by this, she dialed a charter plane service and packed a large suitcase with several changes of clothing. Hesitating, she looked at the red silk dress that now hung in her closet. She decided to take it, too.

From the airfield she grabbed a taxi to the mine site. The guard wouldn't let her in the gate.

"Would you please tell Mr. Beausan that Keri Thomas is here?" she asked with desperate patience.

"He's busy, miss. I can't disturb him," the man stated.

Holding on to the wire of the high fence, she peered through the rain and saw a familiar figure. "Reid," she shouted. "Reid!"

He froze. Slowly he turned around and began running over the wet ground.

Sweeping past the guard, he crushed her in his arms. "Keri," he said. "Keri."

Taking her with him, he started back inside. He kissed along her cheek.

"Tears?" he questioned, licking his lips.

"No," she denied.

"Salty rain, Keri?" His attention was diverted to his call, and he talked for several minutes about getting two more pumps to the site. Then he dialed another number. "I'm calling Milton to come take you home."

"I want to stay with you," she protested.

"I'd rather you wait at the house. That's enough, just to know you're there, waiting for me," he said huskily.

Raising damp eyes to his, she nodded. He kissed her once and raced off into the night while she waited for Milton.

At the house, the butler carried her bag into the master suite without hesitation. Keri followed, admiring the holly and red velvet bows entwined along the banisters. She had forgotten to decorate her apartment for Christmas, she realized.

She took a hot shower and put on a gown and a warm, quilted robe of deep rose. Going downstairs, she paused to look at the Christmas tree in the living room before slipping into the library.

At midnight she went up to bed and drifted into a restless sleep. It was dawn when Reid came home.

He took a quick shower and slid into bed beside her warm body, pulling her securely against him.

"Did you get the men out?" she asked.

"Yes, thank God," he whispered. He kissed her cheek. Then he was asleep.

Smiling, she nestled her cheek on his chest, laying an arm across him in a pro-

TECTIVE manner. In another minute, she was sound asleep.

HE WAS STILL SLEEPING on Saturday afternoon. Keri ate a quiet lunch by herself, then strolled down the hall to the library.

A second later, Aunt Hester strode in. She kissed Keri's cheek. "Sit down, dear. How are you?"

"I'm fine," Keri said, happy to see her.

Hester looked lovely. She sat in a comfortable chair and began to catch Keri up on all the news of the last couple of weeks.

Milton brought in a tray with coffee and a plate of *éclairs*.

"I'm glad you're back. I understand from Mrs. Jannis that Reid was a bear to live with the past few days."

Keri murmured, "We had a misunderstanding."

Hester nodded. "I thought so. I'm so glad that you didn't let it stand in your way. Reid needed you," she said firmly.

"Yes, when I saw the news on TV, I had to come." She smiled tremulously at the other woman.

Hester's gentle face took on a pensive mood. "I wish..." She broke off, sighing deeply.

"You would like to be friends with your sister, wouldn't you?" Keri asked with sudden insight. "That's why you came back here after your husband died. You wanted to be with your family."

"There's so few of us, you see. Only three."

Keri wished she could help. She snapped her fingers. Hester started, then looked at her questioningly.

"Reid's party is the twenty-first...."

Why, that's tomorrow, isn't it?" Keri exclaimed in delight.

"Yes, that's right," Hester said.

"Do both you and Amy attend?"

Hester said, "We both come, but we don't talk to each other."

"Well, that's it," Keri decided. "If I can get you two together and guarantee you privacy, would you try to talk to her?"

"Yes, but it won't work. She walked out the one time I attempted that."

"When was that?"

"Back when I first moved here—"

"That was too soon," Keri broke in.

"Listen, Aunt Hester, come an hour early tomorrow, okay? I'll invite Amy to come help arrange flowers. Does she do that?"

Hester shook her head. "Not Amy." Her brow furrowed. "The problem is that Mrs. Jannis and Milton have been handling these parties for years. They go like clockwork."

"Surely there must be something," Keri cried. She racked her brain. "If only Reid would wake up..."

"Do I hear my name being taken in vain?" a bass voice inquired lightly.

Keri's face lit up. "Oh, Reid, we're just trying to think up an excuse to get Aunt Amy here early tomorrow."

The dark brows rose inquiringly. "Pour me some coffee, will you? Why do we need her here early?" He slumped onto the sofa beside Keri. "Good morning, Aunt Hester. Or is it afternoon?"

"Afternoon." Keri grinned. "Hester wants to talk to Amy in private."

"I see," he said slowly. "This smacks of conspiracy and collusion. And right here in my own house while I lay sleeping...oooof!"

An elbow in his side cut off his melo-

dramatic speech. "Are you going to help us or not?" Keri demanded.

Making a face, he rubbed his ribs. "I don't think I have a choice. We'll invite her over for an early supper with us before the festivities begin. How's that?"

"Oh, good!" Keri was pleased.

Hester laughed at the two young lovers. "I must go."

They walked his aunt to the door and waved her off; then arm in arm they returned to the library. He pulled her into his arms. "Call your Aunt Amy first," she reminded him.

Impatiently he dialed the number.

"Hello, Aunt Amy? Keri and I wanted to invite you to have an early supper with us tomorrow night. Can you come at seven?" He chuckled at something his aunt said, said goodbye and hung up.

"What did she say?" Keri demanded.

"She'd love to have supper with us. Do I get a kiss for a reward?" He pursed his lips and held his face down to hers, letting her reach his mouth.

"Ahem," a voice said from the doorway. "Do you need any more coffee, sir?"

Reid raised his head. "No, thank you, Milton. We've had plenty. You may take the tray. And close the door when you go out, please."

"Very good, sir."

Milton crossed the floor on silent feet, picked up the tray and carried it out, closing the door behind him.

"Ohhh," Keri wailed. "What must he think!"

"That I'm about to make love to you and don't wish to be disturbed," Reid supplied calmly.

"Reid..."

"We belong together, don't we?" His breath brushed flames along her temples

as he kissed from one side to the other across her tightly closed eyes.

"Yes, oh, yes."

Her fingers pushed under the fleecy sweatshirt he wore, finding the warm skin of his back.

With a low groan, he pulled from her arms, holding her hands away. "Let's talk, baby," he requested.

She opened disbelieving eyes. "Talk? About what?"

"Us. Are we going to try to make a go of this torrid affair of ours? It will mean planning our schedules so that we can be together all the time with only an occasional night apart."

"Can we do that?" she worried.

"I think so. I have some ideas about consolidating our interests, but we can discuss the details later. Right now, I just wanted to be sure you were with me."

"Yes," she averred. She gave him a brilliant smile, feeling good and secure.

"Who says there's no Santa Claus?" he whispered. "I'm getting all my Christmas wishes."

KERI'S CHEEKS NEEDED no additional color, she decided the next night as she put on her makeup. Reid came out of the bath wearing a towel around his middle. She stared at his handsome masculine physique.

He came over to deliver several spine-tingling kisses to the back of her neck. "What are you wearing? It turns me on!" He gently bit her neck.

"It's the perfume you bought me in Houston, remember?"

"That dress is beautiful on you." He sounded awestruck.

Keri laughed happily. "Very well put, sir!" she exclaimed.

Keri quickly finished with her eyes and lips and stood to survey the total effect. The red silk swished all around her. She was the picture of an enchanted princess.

She turned to the man who watched her with that leashed passion in his eyes. She gave him a curtsy as he slipped into his shirt, whistling softly as he finished dressing.

Keri affixed his cuff links, held his jacket for him and together they went down to wait for their guest.

When Amy arrived, they both went to greet her.

"How lovely to see you again!" she greeted Keri, hugging her before embracing her nephew.

Because of the demands of the party, the evening meal was a simple one served in the breakfast room.

At a signal from Milton, Reid stood. "I have a call to make. Why don't you two join me in the library when you finish your wine?" He strolled out, giving Keri a thumbs-up sign.

"I'm quite looking forward to the party," Amy said. "It's always a highlight of the year for me."

"Hester is here," Keri said.

"Yes, she always comes," the aunt replied.

Keri licked her lips. "She's here now. In the library. To see you, Aunt Amy," she continued quickly. "Please see her. Talk to her. Don't...throw away the chance to be friends," she pleaded.

Keri held her breath, watching as changing tides of emotion poured across the patrician features.

"I wouldn't know what to say," Amy protested faintly.

Keri took heart. "Just say, 'Hello, sister,'" she suggested. "Come on. Now's a good time. You have an hour."

Leading the way, she coaxed Amy to the library door, opened it and stood aside. She caught a glimpse of Hester across the room. Amy stepped over the threshold. There was a moment of silence.

"Hello, sister," they said unison.

Keri closed the door.

Reid stood down the hall.

With a supportive arm around her, Reid guided her into the living room where they waited until his guests started arriving. He kept Keri at his side, introducing her to everyone.

It was more than an hour later when the two aunts drifted into the crowded living room. They weren't arm in arm, but Keri noticed a suspicious brightness in their gray eyes when the sisters approached them. Hester clasped Reid, while Amy put both arms around Keri's petite form and hugged the girl tightly.

"We've been such fools," Hester admitted. "Each of us wanting to speak to the other but letting fear hold us back."

"Not without cause," Amy reminded her.

"True. Well, we come by it honestly. All Beausans are stiff-necked."

"Father wasn't too bad," Amy said.

Hester agreed. "But he had Mother."

Keri maintained a smile while the three relatives discussed the merits of various ancestors, then split up to mingle with the other guests.

It was nearly midnight when Keri went upstairs to freshen up. When she returned, she watched the members of the party, wearing their holiday clothes and faces, ever-moving in a changing pattern.

A lovely girl clung to Reid's arm. He was smiling down at her with a fond, indulgent ambience.

A stab of pain hit Keri so unexpect-

edly that she nearly staggered under the blow. Swiftly she walked down the hall, into an empty room and out the side door onto the patio. Like a wraith, she glided across it to stand at the balcony where she could see into the living room. Reid was still talking and laughing with the girl.

The two aunts were together amidst a group of people who were obviously brimming with Christmas cheer. Milton moved on his quick cat-feet among the crowd.

She turned away from the house and followed the path to the canal. She walked along its grassy bank in the moonlight, feeling alone.

Reid would marry someone like that girl, someone of his background, not a self-made fast-food entrepreneur. Who could blame him? Who wanted an orphan who didn't even remember her parents and had no other known blood ties?

She wanted to leave, to go back to Houston where she had found a measure of safety. But she couldn't. She had told Reid that she would stay.

She clenched her hands against her chest. The burning pain had returned, as if her lung were torn again. This time it was her heart that was punctured.

"Running away?" A voice spoke from the shadows.

Keri whirled to face him. "Reid! You startled me!"

"You didn't answer my question."

"I—I just came out for some air," she said.

"But you were thinking of leaving."

"Don't be silly," she denied. "What are you doing out here?"

"Looking for you. Our guests are leaving." He took her hand and walked with her to the house.

The guests' departure proceeded in a leisurely fashion.

"Let's go into the library," Reid said. "Why are you thinking of leaving?" he demanded.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Come on, Keri," he barked impatiently. "What emotion has gotten too strong for you to handle? Why do you want to run out?"

"I'm not going to run out. I said I would stay." Her voice came out quivering instead of firm as she meant it to be.

"Good!" he grated. He stalked across the room. "What am I going to do with you?" he asked, spinning back to glare at her.

"What do you want me to say?" she cried. "What do you want from me?"

Slowly he approached. "I want you to love me as I love you," he said. "I want you to admit that what we have is something special that transcends time and circumstances."

She could only stare at him in wonder.

"I want you to know that we belong together. I want you to be *happy* about that, not resentful or angry or whatever you seem to be. Do you understand?"

"No."

He shook his head as he continued. "And I don't want you running out on me every time you get upset...or whenever your own feelings get too strong to be controlled and you get scared."

"I don't know what you're talking about," she protested.

"And another thing," he added. "I don't want you to accuse me of living in the past or of reaching for a dream when I'm feeling nostalgic or when I take you to places where we've been to-

gether at other times. It's the little things that bind people together—the shared memories, the little private jokes. It isn't me who's living in the past—it's you who are running from it. I know you, Keri Thomas. You're frightened to death of love!" he berated her. "You run from it!"

"You never said anything about love," she told him.

"For heaven's sake, couldn't you see how much I wanted you?"

Keri held out a hand to him, and he helped her up. "Yes, I could see you wanted me—but love?" She shook her head.

His face softened. "Yes, *love*," he affirmed. "Why the disappearing act to-night?" he asked.

"I saw some girl hanging on your arm and...I thought someday you would marry someone like her. I knew you would never love me..."

"Oh, Keri." He went to the desk, unlocked a drawer and removed a small package. Coming to her, he said, "Will you marry me, Keri Thomas?"

Abruptly, her legs gave out on her, and Keri sat down heavily on the sofa.

Reid opened the box and removed a ring. In its center was a magnificent ruby, its glowing color accented by a circle of diamonds.

She gasped as he held it out to her. "You can't want to marry me, Reid."

"You are everything I want." He sat beside her, his thigh hard and warm beside her own. "Don't make me wait any longer. I've tried to give you little hints for weeks."

He lifted her hand and slipped the ring on her finger while she sat there in a daze.

"Are you sure this is what you want, really sure?" she asked in wobbly tones.

He smiled seductively. "You are one difficult female to convince. Since the holidays are coming up, I thought we could combine our wedding and honeymoon with Christmas. Maybe you'll believe me when you see the wedding ring on your hand."

"Well, I...well, really, Reid," she spluttered.

His head bent to hers. "Say yes, darling."

"Yes, darling," she mimicked. Then she smiled, tears filled her eyes and she hid her face on his jacket.

Holding her close, he walked out of the room and up the stairs.

In the bedroom, they faced each other with the realization of total commitment and love at long last come to fruition.

"You're so lovely," he said as he removed one item after another from her until he had reached the desired goal. She resisted climbing into the bed until he was ready. She pushed him into a chair and knelt to untie his shoes.

"I've missed you," he said, and there was the loneliness of ten years in his voice.

"We wouldn't have made it before. We were too young," she told him.

"Sweet gypsy," he murmured. "Come to me."

"I love you," she whispered.

He buried his face in the cloud of dark hair. "That's the first time you've said it," he said.

"I've wanted to, often." She pressed her cheek to his, then searched along his face with her fingers.

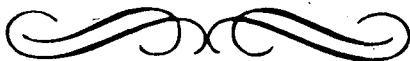
"I love you."

His lips covered hers in a seal of promise.

"Your roaming days are over, gypsy," he told her.

"We can drop the 'i' from my name. I'm no longer homeward bound. I'm home." She laid her hands on his strong arms. "In your arms, I'm home."

"So you are," he whispered. "And so am I."



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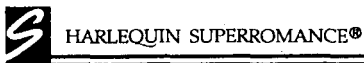
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ACROSS

1. Place
4. Pretense
8. Mary's pet
12. First number
13. Challenge
14. Concept
15. Slanted line
17. Give temporarily
18. Leather strip
19. Claim
21. "___ a Wonderful Life"
23. Sharp
27. Merge
30. Completed
33. Green legume
34. Coffee vessels
35. Rather or Rowan
36. Lichen's kin
37. "___ King" Cole
38. Magician's stick
39. Poker player's contribution
40. Sphere
42. Hit the slopes
44. "King ___" (Shakespeare play)
47. Boise's state
51. "M*A*S*H" star
54. Track
56. Twosome
57. Qualified
58. Mine yield
59. Border
60. Cardinal and scarlet

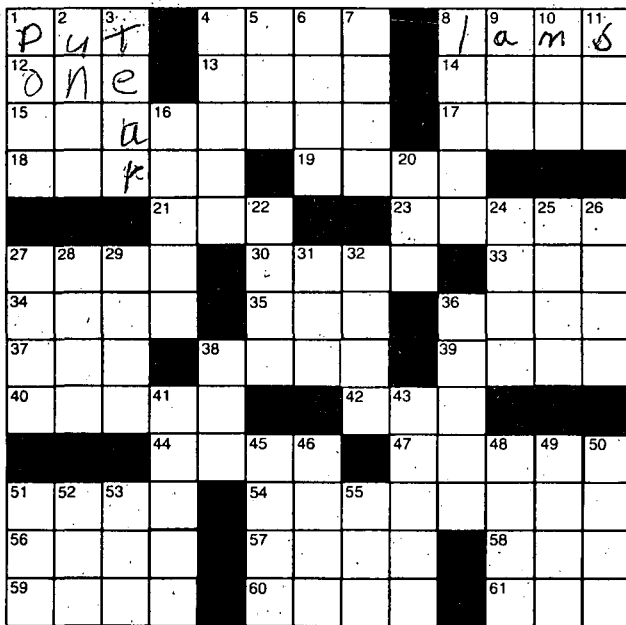
61. Writing implement

DOWN

1. Seed cases
2. Apparatus
3. Rip
4. Take on
5. Tunafish holder
6. Snare
7. Vend
8. Purple flower
9. Lemon beverage
10. Chess pieces
11. Corrupt
16. Pluses
20. Hearing device
22. Carbonated drink
24. "It Came ___ the Midnight Clear"
25. Experiment
26. Comfort
27. Psychiatrist Carl ___
28. Spoken
29. Division word
31. Truck
32. Purposes
36. Servants
38. Small
41. Loud noise

43. Toys for windy days
45. Long way off
46. Dressing gown
48. On the peak
49. At this location
50. Ready for business
51. Imitate
52. Young boy
53. Shovel
55. Ancient

Solution on page 66 of this issue.



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STAR SIGNS—NOVEMBER & DECEMBER



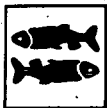
CAPRICORN December 23-January 22

Financial aspects are well starred and there may be an opportunity to increase your income in the long term. Social events late in the month may prove a little more difficult than expected.



AQUARIUS January 23-February 22

Long-term projects that have seemingly fizzled out will start to reenergize and move forward. Friends will be supportive and with their help you can achieve anything.



PISCES February 23-March 22

Obstacles that have stood in your way especially with regard to relationships will vanish, and you will feel more confident for the future. A new job offer could lead to even greater security.



ARIES March 23-April 22

An easy-going month with lots of social events and pleasurable activities. A friend may need help to sort out a complicated problem; however, try not to become too involved.



TAURUS April 23-May 22

Domestic and family matters are very much to the fore with trends indicating a more harmonious period with a feeling of greater contentment.



GEMINI May 23-June 21

A generally fortunate month with new opportunities presenting themselves. A partner may feel somewhat envious but by including him you should be able to allay any problems.



CANCER June 22-July 22

Career moves are an exciting prospect and although it may mean extra work, the rewards will be worth it. Property matters are also on your mind and some of you may plan a move.

STAR SIGNS (continued)



LEO July 23-August 22

You should feel very positive and full of energy. Now is an excellent time to tackle those jobs you've been neglecting or take up a new hobby.



VIRGO August 23-September 22

Don't take out your frustrations on others as they may not be as forgiving as you'll need. Instead focus on your own actions and why your plans may not have worked out as you hoped.



LIBRA September 23-October 22

Romantic encounters make this a month to remember. You should feel buoyant and able to relax and enjoy yourself to the fullest. Finances receive a boost late in the month.



SCORPIO October 23-November 22

Some inner conflicts need resolving so find some time for yourself. A financial boost late in the month lifts your spirits and enables you to plan the future with renewed optimism.



SAGITTARIUS November 23-December 22

Romance and travel combine to make this an exciting month with some of your aspirations coming true. Watch out that a careless accident doesn't spoil this happy time.

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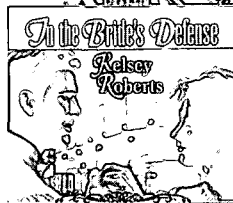
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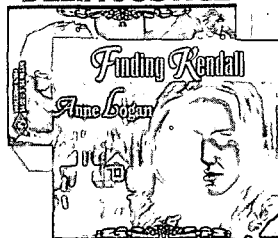
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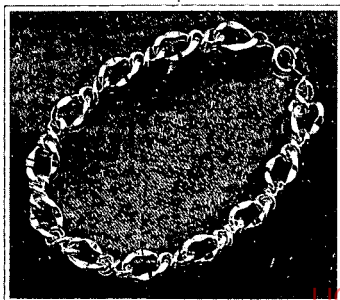
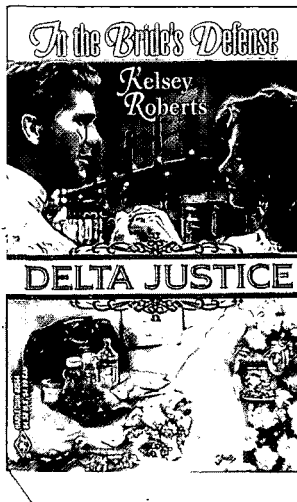
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